

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S **Mystery** MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY 1999

## **A LONG WINTER'S NAP**

In their wildest  
dreams they'd  
never thought  
it possible

BY ANDREW  
DEQUASIE

Plus...

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Bentley Dadmum  
Jack Finney**

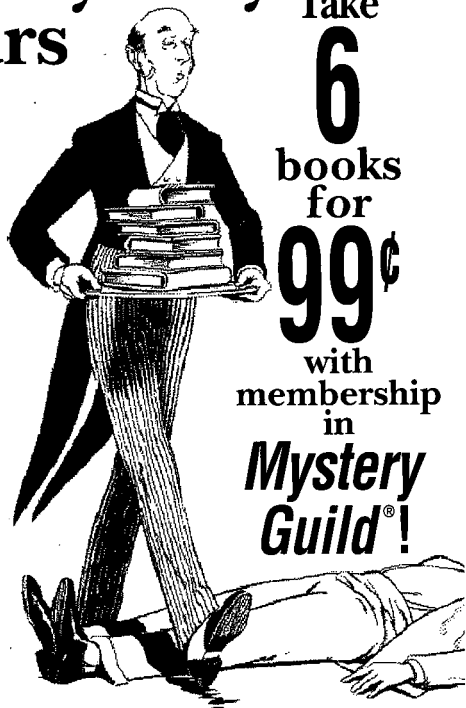
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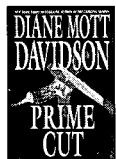
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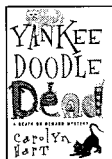
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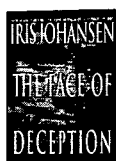
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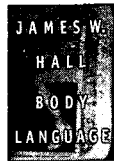
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

**A**ndrew Dequasie, author of our cover story "A Long Winter's Nap," is a chemical engineer and holds seven patents on capacitor design. Early in his career he spent some years in "an excessively exciting job (too many fires and explosions) making rocket fuels based on boron. Then came twenty-five years in capacitor research . . . [and] ten years as a consultant." He wrote *The Green Flame*, "the story of the government-sponsored boron fuels project, which was dropped in 1959 after costing eight lives and a billion dollars" (American Chemical Society, 1991), and two novels: *The Dragonslayers*, a medieval satire (Carlton, 1973), and *Thirsty*, a humorous Western that won the Western Writers of America's award for best novel by a new Western writer (Walker, 1983).

C. K. Vermillion, the author of "Switcheroo," is a clinical nurse specialist in geriatrics who has

also written nonfiction in her field; her research led to a "published work [that's] a first-class thriller to only me and a few other die-hard nurses who find bed sore development and wound healing processes to be fascinating phenomena." "Switcheroo" is her first piece of fiction. "With regard to this story, in my extensive work with elderly who have Alzheimer's, I've learned to never disregard the patient's demented ramblings. Often you find a nugget of truth buried there (as with Estelle)."

Another first mystery: "Killing the Story" by Ken Kolasinski, a professional newsman who has also written extensively for *International Boxing Digest*. "My inspiration for becoming a writer was the radio drama from the '40's and '50's, *Night Beat*. It combined mystery and newspapers in a way reminiscent of Ross Macdonald or Raymond Chandler."

Welcome to all!

---

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FICTION

# A LONG WINTER'S NAP

Andrew Dequasie



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Sammy Peterson! Good Lord, how that name haunts me! Saint or sinner, friend or fraud? Only Sammy knows for sure.

In September about ten years ago, he bought the little green and white clapboard house down where Wilderness Road joins the county road.

The county road is paved and handles upward of a hundred cars a day. Wilderness Road is a private dirt road about two miles long that snakes along Smith Brook. It climbs by twists and turns for the first mile, then levels out into the most beautiful valley you ever laid eyes on. Florida Pond sits in the middle of the valley, a ten acre mirror for the Florida Club lodge, a large log building that sits off to the right, blending into a grove of the finest old virgin oaks that ever grew in the state of Vermont.

At first sight it looks like a rustic retreat for the wealthy, but that's misleading. The Florida Club came into being because its members aren't wealthy. Well off, perhaps; but not wealthy. Our members are all local guys, all bachelors, mostly from the Barre and Montpelier area, and all are retired or have seasonal jobs that leave them free to go to Florida for the winter. That's the thing, you see; by going in a group the club members save a bundle of cash, and being together like that, we have one hell of a good time.

It's the best of two worlds, really. In December we head for Flor-

ida, staying wherever we've been able to line up the best deal. We have our own bus and make lots of side trips to visit favorite haunts and old friends down there. Then in April we come back to Vermont in time for the trout season and all the other joys of Vermont's spring, summer, and fall.

Okay, it's a "good old boys" club. Call it that if you want to. Membership is by invitation only, and no women invited. It's generally considered that women would put a damper on things. The beer parties, poker games, and hunting just wouldn't be the same. The bunk space, one big room with forty double-deck bunks, just wouldn't do for women. Some of our guys like to swim bare-naked in Florida Pond, and a few make the lodge their Vermont home, doing all the maintenance as payment. No, sir, it's not a fit association for women, and we do them the kindness of keeping the whole thing quiet so they won't hear of it.

All of us are on the membership committee, one of our most sacred duties in the club. We like to keep the active membership at forty, and, since we are of mature years, it's an uncommon year when we don't lose people to disabilities or the Grim Reaper. So we always have an eye out for unencumbered men of good habits, genial disposition, mature years, and adequate means.

That's how I came to recommend Sammy Peterson for membership. And if I hadn't, someone else would have. His qualifications were just that obvious.



I first met him when I was out for a walk near the lower end of Wilderness Road. He had reached the first of our signs that said PRIVATE ROAD, NO TRESPASSING and was standing in the middle of the road, looking at the sign as if it were a TV screen that might say something more favorable if he waited long enough.

As soon as he caught sight of me he called out, "Sir, can you help me? I'm puzzled by this sign. The real estate lady led me to believe the land hereabouts is publicly owned, part of the state forest system."

"Not quite," I said. "The valley that Smith Brook runs through is owned by a private club. The house down at the foot of this road is private, too. But the whole of it is surrounded by state forest."

"Oh," he said. "I just bought that house down by the main road. My name is Sammy Peterson. Call me Sammy." And he came forward with his right paw stuck out for a handshake.

"Andy Adams," I said, and he introduced me to that handshake of his. It was a warm, grateful, reunion handshake.

"I've never bought a country house before," Sammy said. "Would you be kind enough to look it over with me and give me some pointers on fixing it up?"

I grinned and said, "You don't need me for that. Just do whatever your wife wants."

"Marcy died a few months ago," Sammy said in softly reverent tones. "It's the mechanical things

I need advice on. The water supply, the furnace, and such. They're all new to me. I'd be ever so grateful."

Well, I'm not a hardnose. A man who asks for help and seems as lost as Sammy did, I'm not going to turn him down. I went through the house with him, helped him with his TV antenna, pointed out the fuse box, suggested a few things to keep around for power failures, showed him the pressure control for the well pump, the reset button for the furnace, and pointed out a few places where paint, putty, or weather stripping needed tending to.

For his part he kept me supplied with beer and made me feel like a champion jack-of-all-trades. It seemed as if every morsel of common sense know-how I came up with was a mind-opening revelation to him.

By the time I left Sammy's place I was already thinking that he was a good membership prospect for the Florida Club. I had discovered that he was a sometime bowler and had invited him to join a friendly little game the following Wednesday. Unknown to Sammy, that friendly little bowling game was one of our standard admission tests for the Florida Club. A few of us would take a prospect to the bowling alley, needle him on missed pins, and get him to make a losing bet or two. That tells you a lot about what sort of temper a guy might have. Then we'd take him to a cosy bar and check out his drinking habits.





It was a marvel to me that I had accepted Sammy so quickly. I was generally a whole lot more cautious than that. But Sammy had that sort of effect on everyone. Everybody liked Sammy. Everybody trusted him.

There was nothing threatening about him. He was chubby, a little less than average height, rosy-cheeked, brown-haired, brown-eyed. He wasn't very strong, handsome, or brilliant. He was always appreciative, and a very good listener. Around Sammy a man could just relax and be himself or something more. The question of his membership came to a vote at the next full meeting of the club.

Barney, one of the guys who went along on the bowling and booze test, had hit upon one problem the rest of us had missed, though. "Mr. Peterson ain't partial to Florida as a wintering place," he said. "Most likely he'll never join our winter migration."

Barney had asked Sammy if he had ever gone to Florida for the winter, and Sammy had said, "Yes, I've done that, but then I found something better. I wouldn't spend another winter in Florida."

Ordinarily that would have killed the deal, but we found ourselves willing to bend in Sammy's case. For one thing owning the house at the foot of Wilderness Road put him in a good watchdog position. And if he were a member, the club would probably get a first option to buy his house if he ever left. The vote was

unanimously in favor of Sammy on the first ballot, so I phoned him and invited him up to the lodge. He was there in twenty minutes, all agog that we were actually inviting him to join. I introduced him around and soon discovered that he had a phenomenal memory for names. Introduce me to three people and I have to scribble myself a note to remember them. But there was Sammy with nearly forty new names to remember and having no trouble at all. As I watched his easy acceptance, it crossed my mind that he was sort of like a virus. Everyone who met him got the Sammy Fever. It was probably just a touch of jealousy on my part.

October and November sailed by as smoothly as a leaf on a pond. Sammy remained in favor and gave us no cause to regret his membership. He did gain weight something awful, but we figured that was his problem, none of our business. He was a good pinochle player and a poor poker player, a combination the rest of us liked.

When the time for our Florida departure came, we were really sorry that Sammy wasn't coming but so eager for this yearly adventure that saying goodbye to him was no big deal.

Going with the Florida migration never had been an absolute requirement for club membership. Actually, we counted on having at least one member winter over in Vermont to protect the lodge. In that first winter of Sammy's membership, Barney's

daughter was having family problems, so Barney had to stay close to her and agreed to spend the winter at the lodge.

Sammy had declined to participate in caretaking the lodge, saying that he had other plans for the winter. What Sammy had done that winter Barney made no attempt to discuss until we met Sammy ourselves in April.

I was having a cup of coffee with Barney early one morning in the front room of the lodge building. It was the second week of April, and I was still talking to Barney about the latest Florida trip when the front door opened and a peculiar-looking fella came in and just stood there. His clothes were the most baggy, ill-fitting set of sacks I had ever seen a man dressed in. He was obviously lost, and I got up to send him on his way but was inclined to be polite about it. "Can I help you, sir?" I asked. And even as I asked it, I began to think that this guy looked vaguely familiar. Then I heard Barney say, "You remember Sammy Peterson, don't you?"

"Good Lord, Sammy!" I exclaimed. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing serious," Sammy assured me as I ushered him over to the table where Barney still sat. "I've lost some weight, just as I do every winter."

"What did he do, Barney, quit eating?" I joked.

"That's right," Barney said. "A critter in hibernation don't eat at all."

I grinned, looking from Barney

to Sammy and back again. They were pretending to be serious about it. At least that's what I thought.

Barney read the disbelief in my face and said, "Tell you what, Andy, next winter I'll go to Florida and you can stay here and watch Sammy hibernate."

"Okay, what *really* happened?" I asked.

But they stuck to the hibernation story while I spent a good quarter hour trying to shake them loose from it. They claimed that Sammy had gone to bed the week after our bus left for Florida and hadn't awakened until the last week of March. And how did Barney know that? Well, there was a clear view into Sammy's second floor bedroom from the hill that rose directly behind the house. Sammy had asked Barney to watch over him, and Barney had done that.

Why not just sleep in the lodge? Not cool enough, not quiet enough. Why not just have Barney tiptoe into Sammy's house instead of playing Peeping Tom? That would trigger the burglar alarms that were wired to phone the police.

There's a limit to how far you can prod your friends over a story like that without actually calling them liars. I eased off somewhere just short of that. I wasn't really buying their story but thought I'd treat it as a mystery and go along with the thing until I could figure what they were up to.

When I was ready to leave the lodge that morning, Sammy said,



"Please don't speak of this hibernation thing to any outsiders. For safety's sake I had to have Barney watch over me as my wife Marcy used to. Now Barney insists that it's a duty to the club that we should tell the other members, but that's quite enough, don't you think?"

Of course it was, I agreed. And walking to my car, I had to chuckle. Tell anyone else about my friend who hibernates? I'd just as soon talk about the little green men from the flying saucer parked in my garage.

As they heard of it, the rest of the club members reacted somewhat as I did, and it gave all of us a great conversation piece. If Sammy had been alone in claiming hibernation, we'd have laughed him right out of the club. Barney was something different. He was one of those legendary Vermont natives, part hunter, part farmer, entirely independent. Nobody's fool. The thing about Barney checking on Sammy through the window from the back hill sounded fishy, and we all took our turns questioning it. But Barney said he'd used binoculars, Sammy had shifted position every once in a long while, and once or twice he had seen the covers move slightly in response to a deep breath. And there were never any tracks in the snow around Sammy's house except for tracks Barney himself made when he went pussy-footing around the place.

Barney admitted that he had been very skeptical through the first six weeks or so and had on-

ly begun to believe when he noticed the frost pattern he saw on the windows on the very coldest days. The frost was always light but always just slightly heavier on Sammy's bedroom window where the humidity would be slightly higher due to Sammy's breath. Would anyone have been clever enough to include that little touch in a hoax? No, sir! That was real!

The month of May sailed along and talk of Sammy's hibernation began to fade out. The novelty had worn off. I suppose a women's club would have given it two or three months of talk, but guys aren't like that. It wasn't a Super Bowl event.

Then Memorial Day weekend came, and we had one of our all-day picnic meetings. There was plenty of beer, which was probably a prerequisite for the Polar Bear Challenge, a tradition of this particular meeting. One becomes a polar bear by stripping buff-naked and taking a plunge in the shallow end of Florida Pond. The polar bears, thus anointed, are then duty-bound to grab any other able-bodied member who hasn't taken the plunge and dunk him in the pond, fully clothed or otherwise. Florida Pond is a sort of liquid ice at that time of year, and there are only two ways an able-bodied member can avoid that baptism. The safest way is to stay home. The other way is to stay sober, hang onto your car keys, and make a run for it at the first sign of anything naked streaking toward the pond.





Well, I considered warning Sammy about the Polar Bear Challenge, but that was against club rules. New guys were prime targets. So Sammy found himself with a choice of going in naked or fully clothed and was game enough to play idiot with the rest of us, plunging in, shrieking a primal shriek, then churning free of the water and dashing back to the lodge. There were some who had to play macho, swimming around as if they really were part polar bear, but that wasn't Sammy's style or mine.

Several of us saw Sammy's tattoo, but regular guys can't stare at each other in the naked condition. So we pretended not to notice the tattoo until he had his pants on.

"Remember the *Maine*!" I said. "That's not a common slogan these days."

"No, I guess it isn't," Sammy said, quickly pulling on an undershirt and topping it off with a dark jersey. Several of us stood there, curious about the story behind the tattoo, and Sammy was obviously embarrassed. "Well, you know," he said, "a guy drinks too much one evening, and there he is the next day with a tattoo that makes no sober sense."

"When was that?" I asked, not meaning to be pushy but just out of spur-of-the-moment curiosity.

Sammy sort of twitched his mouth and eyebrows around a moment, then said, "Before you were born, Andy."

"Nobody's that old!" I laughed, and the others laughed with me.

"Should have known I couldn't fool you guys," Sammy laughed. "Let's go see if the other polar bears have caught anyone."

But the thing about Sammy's tattoo wasn't done with. The story spread through the whole membership, and every now and then one of us would try to worm a little more of the story out of Sammy. One morning when Barney, Sammy, and I were alone in the lodge, I made some sort of low-key remark about the tattoo and hit a nerve.

"Geez, you guys just won't let up on that, will you?" he said, and his eyes were watery as if tears were about to spill forth. "You keep asking and asking, and if I tell you, you're going to laugh and call me a liar."

Barney and I got him soothed down and cosied up to a cup of Irish coffee, gently assured him of our friendship, and got him to talking.

"The tattoo was just a youthful folly," he said. "I was in the navy at the time, and it seemed the thing to do."

"At what time?" Barney asked.

"In February of 1898," Sammy replied. "Two days after St. Valentine's Day, it was. The day after the *Maine* was sunk."

"That would make you more'n a hundred years old!" I gasped.

"A hundred nineteen," Sammy said.

"You don't look to be fifty yet!" Barney protested.

"Thank you," Sammy replied. "This, you see, is the main reason. I choose to hibernate. If it were



merely to escape the winter, I might migrate as you fellows do. No, gentlemen, I've slept away about one third of each of the last seventy-seven years, and as you observe, my physical age appears perhaps seventy years less than it actually is. So, even allowing for about eighteen years lost in sleep, have I not gained more than fifty years of useful, active life?"

"Why, that's tremendous!" I burst out. "Why not offer it to the world? You'd be a hero in every nation and a billionaire in every currency!"

"I've given it a great deal of thought," Sammy admitted. "A very great deal of thought. But you see, a sleeping person is helpless. Wouldn't others of cunning ambition everywhere remain awake to pounce on the sleeping ones? I cannot create such a world."

"It's a shame," Barney said. "If anything happened to you, your discovery would be gone forever."

"Not at all," Sammy chuckled. "The 'secret' remains where I found it, scattered among the free public libraries of the world. As with so much of what we call new, it's only a compounding of old discoveries."

"Why should hibernating make a man live longer?" Barney asked.

"I think it's a combination of several factors," Sammy said. "Ask yourself why we need sleep at all, and the answer seems to be that the body and the brain have a need to repair themselves from the ravages of the day. So

perhaps longer sleep results in greater repair.

"Then consider the weight loss. The body burns off all excess fat and, I suspect, clears all the cholesterol from the circulatory system in the process.

"And finally, it is known that peace, contentment, and good humor are associated with longevity. In that regard, my friends, hibernation is superb. You can't imagine the feeling of well-being one awakens with at the end of that long sleep! That alone may be the answer."

We let that soak in awhile, then Barney said, "It makes a whole lot of sense. You're truly a deep thinker, Sammy."

"Oh, not really," Sammy replied with his usual modesty. "It's just that I've had a great deal of time to consider that very question."

Within another week the entire club membership knew the full story of the tattoo and its implications. It was the time of the groundswell, the time in which all of us began to think of hibernation in personal terms. Here was a chance to extend our time on earth by maybe ten or twenty years while still avoiding the miseries of winter. And maybe it wouldn't cost any more than our Florida migration had.

Sammy was terribly upset when we began to approach him on it. "Please! Don't ask it of me!" he said. "I could neither grant it nor refuse it. It would drive me crazy! Just leave well enough alone. We're all happy as we are, aren't we?"

Well, easy does it, my father always used to say. We backed off each time he got upset and came back to it little by little each time we caught him in a relaxed mood. Eventually we got down to specifics.

He was worried about secrecy and needlessly so. We gave him endless examples of secrets the Florida Club had kept, proving conclusively that our guys could keep a secret like a Swiss banker with lockjaw.

He was worried about security. Well, who had watched over him last winter? Barney! And Barney would be available again. His daughter's troubles continued and Barney would have to keep company with the chickadees again.

He was worried that we couldn't afford it. And we shared his worry on that. The potion he took to induce hibernation included some very rare medicinals. He would have to charge us five thousand dollars each just to break even. Most of us spent around four thousand on the Florida trip, but those who had to could squeak by on two. Barney and I began polling the members, totting up who wanted to hibernate and how much they could afford. It turned out that all of us wanted to try it, but fifteen of the guys couldn't quite find the five thousand.

We encouraged the fifteen to dig deeper and maybe see if they couldn't sell something. After all, this could add a lot to their useful years. Ordinary economics didn't apply.

They dug deeper, and the fifteen became twelve who were short by just twenty-two thousand dollars. We were into our full June meeting when I made my decision. I offered interest-free loans to cover the shortfall. "It's one helluva bargain," I said. "You guys will pay it back if anyone can, and I get to live longer to spend what I do have." What a roar of applause greeted that offer! I swear it might have been heard all the way to Montpelier.

Now Sammy had just one more impediment for us. "I would have mentioned this sooner if I had ever guessed how sincere you were about hibernating," he said. "But the fact is, one must store up a great deal of body fat to hibernate successfully. You've seen how fat I get in the fall and how thin I am in the spring. That's an absolute necessity. Each of you must increase your body weight by about thirty percent."

True, we should have expected that, but it's the sort of thing you block out when you're reaching for something you really want. Fat was not an "in" thing at the Florida Club. We had some overweight members who had spent their lives fighting it, but most of us, naturally, voluntarily or under doctor's orders, were between average and skinny.

It took some rationalizing and mental adjustment, but we bulldozed our way through that hurdle just as we had the others. When it comes to determination and will-to-win, oldtimers like us are hard to beat.





Sammy said we would have to have weigh-in sessions around the first of October, November, and December, and he would need a third of the money on each of those occasions. He stressed that we had to be very serious about reaching our weight goals. Serious? Hell! We decided to make a game of it. We dragged out the scale we used for deer kills and had the first weigh-in right there at the June meeting. There would be a fifty dollar prize for the biggest percentage weight gain every month.

For most of us it was a complete reversal of eating habits. I thought it was going to be easy. I had always had a great liking for blueberry pie and thought I'd be able to meet the weight on the strength of that alone. Not so. My liking for blueberry pie died after the first week of gorging myself on it. In fact, my appetite for all foods suffered a great setback as I tried to shovel the stuff in. I soon knew that one had to find a sustainable pace.

And one had to avoid burning off that hard-won fat. I learned to avoid exercise. Now I could see how heavy people become deep thinkers. They don't just pop up and do all those little tasks that tease us into motion every day. They sit and ponder alternatives and consequences. It becomes a habit, and I cultivated that habit.

But it takes more than brainpower and willpower. It takes something in the genes, a natural talent, to be a champion weight-gainer.

By October the effect on the club membership was dramatic. It was as if a bunch of tenpins had turned into bowling balls. We shuffled about, patting our bellies and showing off the quiver of our chins. Not counting Barney, who wasn't in the game, Burt Larson was the runt of the bunch. He was twenty pounds under his October goal and a subject of deep concern. We decided to quarantine him at the lodge and feed him as a hive feeds the queen bee.

All told, Sammy was well pleased with our progress. He collected the first third of the money and agreed to order the supplies the very next day. By November Burt Larson was still ten pounds shy of his target weight but everything else looked like clear sailing. Sammy collected the second third of the cost. Barney gave his usual talk on prepaying winter bills, draining plumbing, and notifying friends that we'd be away for the winter, just as if we were only going to Florida again.

Then Sammy remembered one last item: he needed the December payment to be in cashier's checks. He hastened to assure us that he knew that we were perfectly trustworthy. The problem was that checks he had written for the supplies would vastly overdraw his own account if the checks for the December payment didn't clear in that swift manner typical of cashier's checks. He would rely on Barney to deposit those checks on the first day of



the hibernation so we could all rest easy.

And suddenly it was December. I drove out to the lodge, struggled out of the car, and lumbered into the lodge to join my ponderous cohorts, feeling perversely macho about the way the sturdy planks of the porch squeaked at my every footstep.

Barney was at the door collecting the cashier's checks as casually as if they were pasteboard tickets.

The place was drunk with excitement. Sammy, already dressed in his pajamas, had just finished the weigh-in of Burt Larson and pronounced him fit to hibernate. His buddies said they had fed him like a baby, including a four A.M. feeding. Someone called for a toast, but Sammy squelched that. "No, no, gentlemen! No alcohol! Tonight we toast to sweet Morpheus with the elixir of hibernation. See to your bunks and blankets while I prepare the magic mix."

Barney had already assigned bunks, and I was grateful that he had given me a lower. Climbing a ladder to a top bunk was more exercise than I wanted. Changing into pajamas, I returned to the main hall.

Sammy was at the bar swirling an electric eggbeater through a golden amber liquid housed in a five gallon plastic container placed inside a larger container. "Safety first, my friends," he said. "For what this stuff cost, one does not trust to one container."

We waited in awe as he contin-

ued to stir. The front door banged open once more and Barney called out, "All present and accounted for, sirs!" A rumbling grunt of approval greeted the announcement. Sammy turned off the eggbeater and set it aside. "All set, my friends!" he announced. "Line up single file and let Doctor Sammy prescribe the dose."

We did that, and Sammy began ladling the stuff into one of those large calibrated glass cylinders chemists use. "One cubic centimeter for each pound of weight," he announced, measuring the doses with hands steady enough to have handled nitroglycerin.

"Taste a little if you choose, but save most of it for a group toast," he said.

I liked that in Sammy. Modest though he was, he had a sense of class and style.

Barney opened the safe behind the bar, held a large manila envelope up for inspection, and said, "All monies present and accounted for, sirs!" then placed the envelope in the safe, closed its door, and gave the combination lock a spin.

I took a tentative sip of my dose as soon as I was clear of the line. It was spicy but not too spicy. I tried to deduce what might be in it. It was reminiscent of ginger and cloves but somehow different. "What's it taste like?" one of the guys in the line asked.

"Sugar and spice and everything nice," I said, setting off a good laugh.

Finally it was time for the



toast. Barney brought out a boom-box and put on a piece of mood music, Brahms' Lullaby. Sammy let the laugh run its course, then raised his glass, and all followed suit. "My dear friends," he said, "here's to pleasant dreams. Or as a better bard than I has put it, 'may the cares that infest your days fold their tents like the Arabs, and as silently steal away.'"

"Hear, hear!" we chanted, and downed the drink.

Sammy smacked his lips, wiped his mouth on a napkin, and, with a grand wave toward the bunk-room, said, "Gentlemen, start your snores!"

I don't know when I've ever gone to bed with such grand expectations. Maybe a few times on Christmas Eve when I was a kid. It was like that. I drifted off to sleep, looking forward to that totally refreshed awakening that Sammy had spoken of.

Then it was daylight again. Someone had raised the shades, and bright sunlight was streaming in through the windows. Eagerly I scrambled from the covers and lunged to the window beside my bunk. It was a beautiful spring day. The sun was pouring its energy down on a receptive earth that, like myself, had scarce awakened from its long slumber. I looked at my watch and saw that it was two thirty.

It was running! My stemwind-er watch was running! And I was just as fat as I had been at bedtime. Another look out the window confirmed the sad truth. The fallen leaves were freshly

fallen. It wasn't spring, it was December second.

I turned and started my great mass of unused fat toward the door. "He's gone," a glum voice from the corner advised. "Sammy's gone, and so's our money. He has folded his blankets and silently stolen away."

"Barney! He couldn't get the money from Barney, could he?"

"Barney's asleep on the floor out there," my glum friend said. "Sammy must have doped him up somehow, too."

"Sammy couldn't open the safe, could he?"

"We've all seen Barney check where he's got the combination written on the wall. Sammy wouldn't miss that any more than you would."

"Maybe it's not too late to call the bank," I said.

"Phone's dead. Anyway, we don't know which bank is his bank, and we needn't doubt it was too late fifteen minutes after his bank opened."

Who could doubt it? The great pajama party had come to an end. Forty former optimists awoke to face the day with every conceivable degree of sorrow, disillusionment, and anger.

We broke into his house at the foot of the road and found nothing of value. There were indications in his bedroom that the "hibernating Sammy" that Barney had watched the previous winter might have been a robot. And Sammy hadn't bought the house, he had only rented it.

Burt Larson's a retired cop. He

says he's going to find Sammy and stomp him about two hundred thousand dollars' worth if it takes him the rest of his life. Most of the guys say they'd bring charges against Sammy if he could be found, but they don't say it very loud. Outsiders might think we did a pretty dumb thing.

And there's the jury problem. There ain't no such thing as twelve jurors Sammy couldn't bamboozle.

We took a full oath, right there on December second, not to say anything to outsiders about it all.

So why talk about it now? Well, some of us think we've figured it out. Sammy was afraid to share

his secret with us, afraid that we couldn't keep it. The proof that he really can hibernate is in his putting on weight that way and then losing it every year. Most of us at the Florida Club agree that we wouldn't go through that hell twice just for money; not even a million.

It was our own fault. We practically forced Sammy to agree to the club's hibernation. He was forced to teach us some sort of lesson. And he did teach us not to make fun of fat people, among other things.

So, Sammy, if you read this, get in touch. We understand. Let's give each other a second chance.

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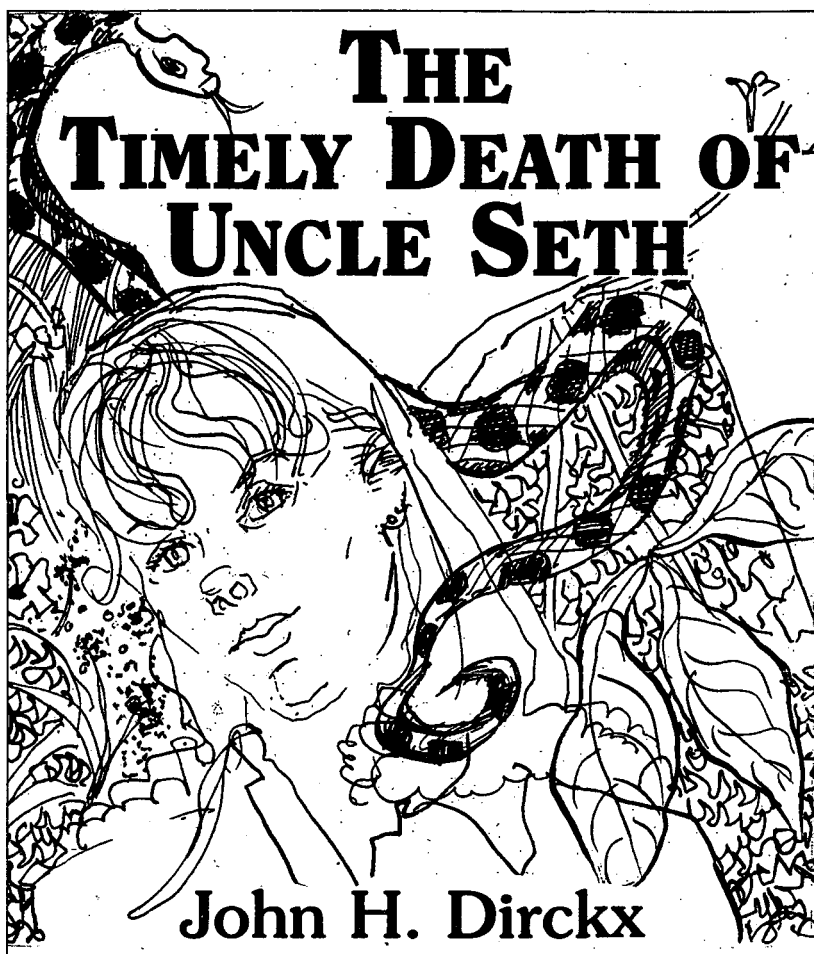
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**F**or as long as she could remember, Sherrin Holst had had a morbid fear of the builders' supply yard on the west edge of town. She'd never been inside the tall rusty fence, but just driving by the place could give her the shivers. Huddled in a deep, weed-grown hollow and hemmed in by woods, it seemed isolated, wild, sinister.

When Sherrin was small, her

father, no doubt thinking he was entertaining her and stimulating her imagination, had peopled those green shadows with lions and snakes and other deadly fauna. As she was growing up, she heard various versions of the ancient but undying rumor that some people who went in there didn't ever come out.

But when Tempora asked her to work at Babbitt's Sand and

Block for a few days as a substitute clerk, she decided it was time to lay childhood fears aside. Tempora was the employment service she'd signed up with during her last summer vacation before college. Not only had the jobs they'd found for her so far been boring; they also hadn't paid more than minimum wage. (Granted, her performance on the typing test had been a disaster.)

The job at the supply yard paid well, and no typing was required. The hours were long—seven to five with an hour for lunch—but at least she wouldn't be there after dark. And she would probably run little risk of encountering a snake or an axe murderer while working in the business office.

She started work the first week in July. Setting off in the car she shared with her sister Bethany—shared in the same sense that two opposing hockey teams share a puck—she passed through the nursing home and used-car lot district, then the tattoo parlor and secondhand clothing store district, and finally the machine shop and warehouse district, to arrive a little before seven A.M. in the gravel driveway, under the sheet metal sign of the supply yard.

A tall, rusty, chain-link fence completely surrounded the yard. At her approach an electrically operated gate screeched open, and a man with a plastic coffee cup in his hand waved her in. "Girl from Tempora? Pull in over there." He was forty-something, squarely and ruggedly built, with

skin like leather and a thick mop of curly white hair. He wore bib overalls and boots with thick rubber soles, and he walked as if his feet hurt.

Sherrin's first impression on seeing the supply yard up close was one of unmitigated chaos. Obviously Babbitt's handled a lot more than sand and blocks. Steel beams, pieces of iron pipe, concrete drainage tiles, and stacks of bricks seemed to have been dumped wherever they would fit, with little attempt at organization. A rutted gravel road ran in and out among open-sided sheds containing heaps of sand and sacks of cement. A workman was piling rolls of fencing material to a perilous height with a forklift.

Sherrin parked as directed next to a battered flatbed truck. The man with the coffee cup opened her car door for her. "I'm Frank Hafkar," he said.

"Hi. Sherrin Holst." She slid out of the car and gave him her time sheet to sign.

"Better roll your windows up tight," he said, using the top of her car as a desk. "Otherwise the dust gets in. Come on over."

He handed back the time sheet and led her to a corrugated iron shed that stood on stout pilings like a boathouse or a wharf. The screen door was marked OFFICE. As they mounted the wooden stairs, a gaunt wolfhound, evidently the veteran of many wars, stirred under the shed and emitted a series of half-hearted yelps.

The office was small, cluttered, dusty, and hot. Windows on all

four sides commanded a view of the yard, which sprawled to the feet of the surrounding hills. A rough wooden counter divided the office into two unequal portions. Several mismatched steel cabinets stood beneath and between the windows.

"My wife usually runs the office," said Hafkar, "but she pulled two weeks' jury duty up in Carney County, where we live. Make yourself at home in here. Before you turn on that fan, be sure any loose papers are under one of these bricks. You won't have much to do—mainly answer the phone and watch the gate." He threw the dregs of his coffee out the door and set the cup on a file cabinet among a litter of ashtrays, file folders, tools, and other cups.

"Contractors will call up for price quotes. That's all in this red book. That board up there is the outs list—stuff we're out of. You check that before you give a quote. If you run into any problems, just hit this button and Uncle Seth or I will come in." He tapped the button lightly, and an electric horn bleated somewhere above the sloping iron roof.

"This other switch works the gate." He pressed it, and the gate by which Sherrin had entered ground shut again. "There's another switch for the gate out there in that shack. Uncle Seth or I will open the gate for customers if we're around. Otherwise you open it and toot for us on the horn. When things get busy, we leave the gate open.

"One thing. Folks sometimes

sort of forget to pay before they slip away, especially when a lot of traffic's out there. And we get bad checks sometimes. So whenever you open that gate for anybody, write down their license number. Unless it's a delivery."

"How will I know if it's a delivery?"

Hafkar's round face split in a homely grin. "If the truck's already full of stuff when it gets here," he said, "it's a delivery."

Sherrin quickly learned that everything in the office, including the two dilapidated chairs, was covered with a film of fine gray dust. It was getting hotter by the minute under the iron roof, and when she turned on the fan, more dust swirled in from outside until she could feel it between her teeth and under her clothes. The portable radio she'd brought along gave forth nothing but static. Under the floor she could hear the dog moving about on his chain and letting out an occasional muffled yap.

There wasn't much business, and what there was Frank Hafkar took care of. He talked to the customers, wrote up the orders on a clipboard, and handled the money. After each sale he came into the office, filed the sales slip under a brick, and put away the check or the cash in a drawer that he unlocked and carefully locked again. Sherrin had already gone over all the cabinets in the office and found most of them locked.

She spent some time emptying ashtrays and tidying up the grub-

by bathroom. She phoned her mother and her friend Marcie, keeping both calls brief. Once she quoted a price on channel angle to a caller without having the faintest idea what channel angle was. Mostly she sat in the breeze of the fan watching the yard man, Uncle Seth, shifting pallet loads of material from one place to another, unhurriedly and with a rigid economy of effort.

Instead of going home for lunch she stopped at a drive-in where some kids she knew from school had summer jobs. When she got back to the supply yard, Uncle Seth opened the gate for her. As she crossed the weed-choked yard from her parking place, she shook the remains of her lunch out of a paper bag on the ground under the office. The dog lunged forward, snapped up the scraps, and retired into the shade to swallow them at leisure.

"Hey, Suzie," yelled Uncle Seth irritably, "don't feed that dog! Duke, he only gets fed once a day, first thing in the morning. He runs loose in here at night. Good watchdog needs to be hungry."

Uncle Seth was a wiry, weatherbeaten old fossil who looked chronically unwashed and seemed always to be chewing something despite a striking shortage of teeth. His widebrimmed aluminum safety helmet perched atop his long, narrow head like a hubcap on a fencepost.

"It was only some fries and pieces of bun," she said, adding as an afterthought, "My name's Sherrin." She headed for the wooden

stairs to the office, cutting diagonally under a tall, funnel-shaped structure next to it.

"Get out of there!" howled Uncle Seth, evidently warming to the role of scold. "That's a good way to get killed, going under there. There's three, four tons of pit run in that hopper." (Sherrin would have called it gravel.) "If them doors was to drop open while you was underneath, goodbye, Suzie. Time they dug you out you'd be squashed flatter than a dishrag. Don't go putting your nose under any of them hoppers. That's how accidents happen."

The afternoon wore on interminably. Sherrin sat baking in her iron box, answering the phone now and then but most of the time watching through the dust-clogged screens as the sun crept slowly toward the high ridge off to the west.

Around three o'clock a paving contractor bought a truckload of pit run. Uncle Seth hadn't exaggerated the abruptness with which the hopper discharged its load. A touch on the release lever and the whole mass of coarse gravel dropped into the contractor's dump truck with a roar like a space shuttle blasting off, sending up billows of dust as thick as smoke. As soon as the truck drove away, Uncle Seth refilled the hopper from a huge, sprawling mound of pit run with a bucket loader that must have been one of the first ones ever made.

Sherrin hadn't seen Frank Hafkar since before lunch, and when it was time to go home, she

asked Uncle Seth if he could sign her time sheet. This he readily did, accepting without question her statement that it was five o'clock. She noted with surprise that his surname was Babbitt. Up to now she'd assumed that Hafkar was the proprietor of the business. True, Uncle Seth had his own key to the cash drawer, and when the mail came, he went through it with authority and dispatch.

That night at dinner her sister Bethany asked her if the supply yard had turned out to be as spooky inside as it looked from the street.

"It's no big deal," said Sherrin. "It's, like, this gigantic junkyard. You wouldn't believe the dust. Tomorrow I'm wearing beige with beige trim."

"Any neat guys working out there this summer?"

"All I saw," replied Sherrin with a sneer of mild disdain, "were a couple of senior citizens and a dog with one ear."

**T**he police dispatcher was getting testy. "Ma'am, is someone actually injured there or not?"

"I told you—I don't know, but I think so." Sherrin tried to keep the panic out of her voice. "When I came back from lunch, there was nobody here. A load of pit run was dumped out of the hopper all over the ground. The dog's chain is caught on the lever, and it looks to me like there's been an accident. Can't you send someone to check? I'm here all alone."

"Paramedics and a patrolman are on the way, ma'am."

She hung up the telephone and went out on the rude landing to wait, her mouth dry and her hands clammy despite the brutal noonday sun. A haze of dust still hung in the air under the hopper. Duke was quiet, seemingly resigned to the shortening of his chain that had resulted from its being looped over the release lever on the hopper. In fact, everything was too quiet, and all her old fears of the place came flooding back, augmented by the certainty of what lay under the mound of pit run at the foot of the stairs.

The ambulance arrived first. Two burly, taciturn, officious attendants attacked the gravel with their bare hands, provoked an avalanche, and fell back to regroup. They had just uncovered one of Uncle Seth's yellow rubber boots when a police cruiser drove in. With the patrolman lending a hand, the paramedics swept the rest of the gravel from the yard man's inert body. They then carried out various complicated rituals before deciding that their efforts were futile and retiring to the air-conditioned ambulance to write up their report.

By this time the policeman had closed the electric gate and hung the CLOSED sign on it. He found Sherrin in the office, staring into the whirling blades of the fan.

"This Mr. Babbitt isn't a relative of yours, is he?" he asked. He was young, rugged in appearance, gentle in manner. He wore a mustache like one of the earlier presi-



dents, she couldn't remember which one. His nametag read PTL E. BYSTROM.

"No. I've only been working here a couple of weeks."

"Summer job?" His eyes kept searching hers as if to assess the emotional impact of the accident.

She nodded.

He stepped closer so he could be heard over the rumble of the fan without shouting. "Can you tell me what happened?" he was carrying a clipboard and a leather wallet, shiny with wear.

Sherrin told him she'd come back from lunch to find the gate open, the yard deserted, and an ominous heap of pit run spilled out under the hopper.

Patrolman Bystrom went to the window and peered down at the yard. "And the dog's chain was caught on that handle just the way it is now? You didn't touch it or try to get him loose?"

"No. I'm kind of afraid of Duke."

"Doesn't anybody work here besides you and Mr. Babbitt?"

"There's a Mr. Hafkar—Frank Hafkar. He, like, runs things. And I guess his wife usually works here in the office, but she's on jury duty. That's why they have me here."

"Any idea where Hafkar is?"

"No. He was here when I went to lunch, but a lot of times he isn't around all afternoon. He told me he lives in Carney County."

A white van stopped outside the gate, and the driver gave a couple of discreet toots on his horn. "That's the coroner," said the policeman, looking at his

watch. "He must've been parked around the corner. I'll go down and let him in."

"Here, this thing opens the gate, too."

The van pulled in and parked next to Patrolman Bystrom's cruiser, and a swarthy, slow-moving man got out. After making a careful survey of the yard and nodding wordlessly to the paramedics in their ambulance, he walked over to where Uncle Seth lay amid irregular hillocks of pit run. Then he went back to the van and got out a camera and a bulky black leather case. After shooting a number of pictures from various angles, he conferred for a long time with the paramedics and then mounted the stairs to the office.

The policeman was on the phone to Information, still trying to track down Frank Hafkar or his wife. The man from the coroner's office exchanged his sunglasses for a pair of gold-rimmed bifocals and showed Sherrin identification. He asked her the same questions the policeman had, and several more. Then he put his sunglasses back on, and he and the policeman went down to the yard and conducted a series of experiments with the hopper lever and the dog's chain.

Sherrin crouched down in her chair in front of the fan and put her hands over her ears to drown out Duke's howls of protest. When would they let her go home?

Even in midafternoon the restaurant was still crowded with

late lunchers from the courthouse across the street—morose defendants awaiting their turn to appear in traffic court, jaded old attorneys and arrogant young ones, clerks, aides, stenographers, witnesses, families, friends, reporters, and police officers in uniform and in plain clothes.

Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn crumpled up the wrappings of his first Junior Ranger Burger and started on the second one. He made it a habit to order only children's fare at fast-food restaurants because it didn't cause the indigestion he usually got from cole slaw, dill pickles, and Our Own Magic Sauce.

His pager went off. Both of the pay phones at the entrance were in use. Knowing that to leave his seat would be to lose it, he stayed put until he'd finished his sandwich and squelched the pager four times.

He deposited his trash in a receptacle and took his drink with him to wait for a phone. In due course he succeeded to a greasy, garlic-scented receiver and called headquarters.

Lieutenant Savage came straight to the point. "Stamaty thinks he's got a homicide out at Babbitt's building supply yard on West Hatch. You know the place?"

"Do you remember where I am, lieutenant? Boettcher hearing? We're recessed until three."

"So sign out. Tell the clerk. They can call you tomorrow. Or next year."

It wasn't the way Auburn preferred to do things, but nobody

had ever accused him of insubordination. He arrived at Babbitt's yard a little before three. A crowd of about a dozen teenagers of both sexes, most of them with bicycles, loitered outside the gate in the shade of a majestic shagbark oak. Patrolman Bystrom opened the gate for Auburn.

The ambulance had left without a passenger. Seth Babbitt's body, under a sheet of blue plastic held down with bricks, still lay where it had been found. The space around the body had been cleared of gravel, however, and the dark patches of sweat on Bystrom's shirt showed who had done most of the work with the shovel.

Auburn lifted the plastic tarp and surveyed Uncle Seth's bony, dust-caked face. "Hardhat didn't do him much good," he remarked.

"No, sir," agreed Bystrom. "I covered him up to keep the sun off him. I figured by the time the man from the coroner's office decided what to do with him he'd be burnt black." He fell abruptly silent as it dawned on him that Auburn was black by birthright.

Stamaty came out of the office, looking strangely dapper in sunglasses and lounge suit, and descended the wooden stairs. He and Auburn, having collaborated on dozens of investigations, carried on a fraternal rivalry in the matter of observations and deductions.

Auburn was still looking over the body. With the toe of his shoe Stamaty raised another flap of the tarp to expose a large steel

wrecking bar lying about a foot from Uncle Seth's right hand.

Auburn inspected the massive counterbalanced doors of the empty hopper. The whole structure was monumentally ancient. The gears of the jury-rigged release apparatus gleamed a tawny red with rusty grease. "Think he could have been trying to unjam these doors when it all came down on him?"

"Never," said Stamaty. "This guy's a hundred years old —"

"Give or take a couple of eons."

"—and you don't live long on a job like this if you're dumb enough to stand under a hopperload of rock and try to pry the doors open with a crowbar."

"Was anybody around when it happened?"

"We've been trying to find that out for the past hour, sergeant," said Bystrom. "The office girl was out to lunch, and the business manager was at home, in Saxtown. He's on his way in now."

"The lieutenant said something about a dog."

"We've got him tied up out back," said Stamaty. "Usually he's on this chain during the day. When the girl got back from lunch—"

"Where is she now?"

"Up there in the office. When she got back from lunch, she found the hopperload of gravel dumped out on the ground, and the chain wrapped around this handle, about like so."

"Where was the dog?"

"Right here on the end of the chain."

"Why'd you take him off? Was he choking or anything?"

"Technical reasons." Stamaty showed him a fresh snag in the sleeve of his jacket.

Auburn stepped into the shade of the office shed and wiped perspiration from his face. "I guess I wouldn't be here if you thought this was an accident, would I?" he said. "Why isn't it?"

"Because the part of the chain that was caught around the handle was the part farthest away from the dog. Bystrom and I played with that chain for ten minutes, and we're convinced the only way the dog could have looped it over the handle, which is fifty-nine inches from the ground, is if he stood on his hind legs and held the chain in his mouth. Somebody deliberately wrapped it around the handle, either before or after the load came down. You try it."

Auburn did. Then he went to his car and radioed headquarters to request the services of an evidence technician. After that he asked Bystrom to stretch yellow plastic tape around the scene of the apparent accident and not to let the business manager approach the body when he arrived.

"I'd better talk to this girl. How upset is she?"

"I think she's calmed down by now."

When Auburn entered the office, he found Sherrin chattering somewhat hysterically on the phone. He took note mechanically of her round baby face, triply pierced ears, nails bitten to the

quick, and gold chain around her left ankle. While waiting for her to finish her call he got out a three by five inch file card and a pen. When she hung up, he showed her identification and entered her name, address, and phone number in the corner of the card.

"How long have you been working here?"

"Since the day after the Fourth of July. I'm just filling in for the regular clerk."

"Are you a student?"

"I'm starting college this fall. Journalism major. Or I might do creative writing."

Auburn, who despised journalists and loathed writers of crime fiction, hoped he was successful in masking his disgust. "What exactly do you do here?"

"Mostly answer the phone and open and close the gate. There's some paperwork."

"Do you run the office all by yourself?"

"Not exactly. Mr. Hafkar's, like, in charge, but he usually takes the afternoon off."

"I understand he's on his way in now. Was there any particular reason why you came to work here? I mean, do you know these people?"

Before giving him a negative answer, she looked for a fleeting moment at the ceiling—or possibly at the cascade of curled bangs that tumbled in artful disorder down her forehead. Since she repeated this maneuver nearly every time she spoke, Auburn eventually concluded it was just

a childish mannerism and not a tipoff that she was lying. Unless she was telling a lot of lies.

"When did you last see Mr. Babbitt alive?"

"Right before I went to lunch."

"Which was at what time?"

Her eyes rolled up and stayed for a good three seconds before she replied. "Like a quarter to one."

"Is that your regular lunchtime?"

"No, I usually go earlier, but we were kind of busy."

"Who was here when you left?"

"Mr. Hafkar was here in the office, and Uncle Seth—Mr. Babbitt was out in the yard."

"Why do you call him Uncle Seth?"

"I don't know. Everybody does."

"Any customers here when you left?"

"No."

"Did you actually leave the yard for lunch?"

"Yes. That's my Maverick out there."

"Where did you have lunch?"

"Pop's Forty-Niner."

"And when did you get back?"

"I'm not sure exactly. Probably like a quarter to two." Over the years Auburn had noticed that people were far more likely to remember when they started their coffee or meal breaks than when they came back from them. Also that, in guessing at their return times, they invariably credited themselves with scrupulous punctuality.

"Was the gate open when you got back?"

"Yes."

"What did you see when you drove in?"

"Nothing special at first. I noticed Mr. Hafkar's van was gone. Then when I started up the steps I saw that the pit run hopper had been dumped on the ground. And the dog's chain was hooked over the lever that opens the doors."

"What did you think had happened?"

"I thought the dog got his chain caught on the lever while Uncle Seth was under the hopper and pulled it open on him."

The phone rang. Sherrin threw him an inquiring glance as she reached for the receiver. "Tell them the yard is closed until further notice due to a death in the family." She complied docilely.

"How did Uncle Seth get along with the dog?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever see him hit the dog or kick it?"

"No. Nobody ever pays any attention to Duke except to tie him up first thing in the morning and turn him loose in the yard at night."

"Did Uncle Seth wait on customers down there in the yard?"

"Sure. Mostly in the afternoon."

"What kind of a guy was he? Easy to get along with?"

"Not very. He always acted, like, mean and bossy. My first day here he made a big deal out of me walking under the hopper."

"Told you not to, you mean? Did you ever see him go under it?"

"No."

"Seems funny he'd be under it

just when the dog decided to get his chain caught on the release lever."

"You mean you think maybe it wasn't an accident?"

Auburn shrugged. "Did anything unusual happen here this morning?"

"No. We were kind of busy, but . . . I did hear Uncle Seth arguing with a man down in the yard."

"What man? A customer?"

"I don't know. I didn't see him. They were right down there under the window."

"What were they saying?"

"This man goes, 'I'm not getting mad.' He goes, 'I don't get mad, I get even.' Then he called Uncle Seth a name. And Uncle Seth called *him* a name, and he goes, 'You get out of here. Because I *do* get mad, and when that happens, I don't just stand around and talk about it.' That's all I heard. Like, the phone rang or something, and I didn't catch any more."

"What time would this have been?"

"Early. About eight thirty."

"Is there any way you could make up a list of the customers who've been here this morning?"

"Not all of them. The bills are here under these two bricks, but if a customer pays cash, they don't put down any name, just write 'cash.' Mr. Hafkar might know who some of them were."

Auburn examined the bills. One stack consisted of carbonless copies of receipted bills, the other of invoices for customers with



open accounts. "What are these numbers on some of the bills? Car license numbers?"

"Mm-hm. Or truck. Sometimes they write that on the bill. Plus I'm supposed to write down the license numbers of people I open the gate for." She pointed to a sheet of brown wrapping paper tacked to the end of the counter under the gate switch.

"You had all these cars through here this morning?"

"No, that goes back like a week. Today's start here."

At the sound of the gate opening, they both looked out the window to see a maroon van in the driveway. The crowd under the oak tree had grown, and a row of idlers now lined part of the fence.

"That's Mr. Hafkar. And his wife, I guess. I've never seen her."

At Patrolman Bystrom's direction, the van parked just inside the gate. Before Auburn could get down the stairs, the Hafkars were out and headed for the spot where Uncle Seth's body lay under its blue shroud.

Hafkar was a rough-hewn specimen whose silver hair and weathered complexion probably made him look older than he was. His wife was what is sometimes genteelly described as "large-boned."

Now and then a simple word or gesture provides the key to someone's whole personality. Auburn, hearing the obscenity that escaped her lips as she approached the body, knew intuitively that Mrs. Hafkar had never cultivated African violets or illustrated children's books.

"I'll have to ask you to stay outside the tape, folks." Auburn showed them identification. "I'll need to ask you a few questions."

"Is that little gal still here?" As Hafkar turned towards him, Auburn caught a whiff of what he took at first for cheap aftershave. Almost at once he realized his mistake. They had both been drinking.

"She's up in the office."

"What's her story about this?"

"When she got back from lunch, the gate was open, a hopperload of gravel had been dumped on the ground, and there was nobody around. She called us for help."

Mrs. Hafkar looked from the blue plastic tarp to Auburn and then quickly away. "Was Uncle Seth already dead when you dug him out?" she asked.

"When the rescue squad got him out, yes, ma'am. When was the last time you saw him alive?"

"Me? I haven't seen him all week. I've had jury duty. Frank?"

"He was on his feet and full of vinegar when I left for lunch."

"About what time was that?"

"I don't know. Probably pretty close to twelve."

"Was there anybody here besides Mr. Babbitt when you left?"

"There weren't any customers, if that's what you mean. Just Uncle Seth and that gal."

"Was he related to either of you?"

"He was my uncle," said Mrs. Hafkar.

"Did he own the business?"

"He thought he did. He inher-

ited it from my grandfather. It was always understood that Frank and I were supposed to be partners—”

“Understood by everybody except Uncle Seth,” said Hafkar. “I quit a good job as a printer seven years ago to work here full time, and Juanita’s been doing the books all those years. He pays us about what he’s paying that little gal up there—”

“And whenever we’d ask about some kind of profit-sharing arrangement, like my grandfather had in mind, he’d say, just wait, you’ll get it all when I’m dead.”

“Did you understand that to mean he was leaving you the business in his will?”

“I doubt if he ever made a will,” said Hafkar.

“Listen,” said Mrs. Hafkar with sudden vehemence, “you’re not going to pin this on us.” Flushed and sweating in the afternoon sun, she shrilled at him with alcoholic fervor. “Maybe we’re not shedding any tears over Uncle Seth, but this was an accident. Frank and I were miles away from here when it happened.”

It was a weakness of Auburn’s that when people got hostile with him he tended to pay them back in the same coin. With an effort he kept his voice level as he asked, “How do you know when it happened?”

“All she means,” said Hafkar, on whom a couple of drinks seemed to have had a relaxing rather than a stimulant effect, “is that it didn’t happen when we were around. Juanita was at the Carney Coun-

ty courthouse all morning, and I picked her up there for lunch.”

“Where did you go for lunch?”

“Home. Where you found me.”

“That was Patrolman Bystrom who phoned you. What jury are you sitting on, Mrs. Hafkar?”

“None,” she said shortly, pouting. “I’m an alternate, on standby.”

“So you haven’t been sworn?”

“No. We have to sign in every morning. They let us go at noon.”

“Can anybody verify where you have both been since noon?”

“Our neighbors’ kid was cutting the grass when we drove in,” said Hafkar. “He waved.”

Auburn made a note of the neighbors’ kid’s name. Then he pointed with his pen at the hopper into whose shade they had unconsciously drifted while talking. “Any idea how an accident like this could happen?”

Hafkar shrugged. “He must have got careless.”

“Is there anything wrong with this hopper as far as you know?”

“It was working okay this morning. Of course, it’s old. Uncle Seth didn’t believe in replacing anything till it fell apart.”

“When they uncovered Mr. Babbitt, there was a crowbar lying next to him on the ground. That mean anything to you?”

“The only thing we use a crowbar for around here is to knock down crates and skids.”

“I don’t know if Officer Bystrom told you this on the phone. The dog’s chain was found looped over this lever.”

Hafkar’s face worked. “Where is the dog?”

"Tied up over there behind that stack of concrete block. Does it seem possible to you that his chain could have got wrapped around the handle accidentally, and dumped the load?"

The gate opened and Kestrel, the police evidence technician, drove in and parked his van next to Stamaty's.

"You say the dog's chain was caught up there when that gal came back from lunch?"

"That's her statement."

"And you believe it?"

"We haven't got anything to disprove it yet. But we aren't satisfied that Mr. Babbitt's death was accidental. From this point on we're considering this a homicide investigation. Did you hear Mr. Babbitt having an argument with somebody this morning?"

"Uncle Seth argued with everybody. He didn't do anything *but* argue and complain all day long."

"Do you remember a particular argument he had this morning with a man who seemed to be threatening to get even with him?"

"No."

"Would you say Mr. Babbitt was mentally sound?"

"He wasn't senile if that's what you mean," said Mrs. Hafkar. "But he was always eccentric, as long as I can remember. Never married, lived alone, and *nobody* was welcome in his house. Is it okay if I go up to the office? I haven't been here for a week and a half, and I'm kind of nervous about what shape the bills are in."

Auburn let them both go. He found Kestrel in his van examin-

ing the crowbar. "Do you think somebody decked him with that," he asked, "and then dumped the gravel on him?"

Kestrel, swabbing off the crowbar with the rapt absorption of a violinist performing a difficult solo passage, answered in his usual austere and astringent manner.

"There seems to be dried blood here, but where it came from is for the coroner to decide. My bailiwick ends at the corpse's skin. Looks like he was wearing a hard-hat when the sky fell on him."

Auburn took a turn around the yard. He supposed the clutter and dust were typical of such places, but he wondered if a little judicious weeding might not make it easier to find things. He stopped to glance at Sherrin's Maverick and stayed to investigate at length. As he mounted the wooden steps to the office, he noticed that some alert entrepreneur had parked a truck full of watermelons out on the road in the shade of the big oak and was plying a brisk trade among the growing crowd of onlookers.

Auburn would have been hard-pressed to characterize the mood that prevailed as he entered the office. Mrs. Hafkar had installed herself behind the counter and was sorting through papers in a file drawer. Hafkar and the temporary office helper were both outside the counter. Auburn had the feeling that they had broken off a strained or heated conversation when they heard him come up the steps.

"Could I talk to you outside for a couple of minutes, miss?" he asked.

Sherrin displayed no reluctance to leave the office. Auburn took her to his car and started the engine so he could put on the air conditioning. "I just want to clear up one or two points in your statement. Did you actually see Mr. Babbitt here when you left for lunch today?"

She did the eye-rolling bit. "I'm not sure. I know his Jeep was still here. You couldn't miss that."

"But you're not sure you saw him out there in the yard when you left?"

"No."

"Do you know when was the last time that hopper was filled with gravel?"

"They call it pit run. Uncle Seth just filled it this morning, like around eleven."

"And I think you said you left for lunch around a quarter to one. And at that time, Mr. Hafkar was still up there in the office?"

"That's right."

"What happened to your car?"

"I don't know," she said with a shrug that might have been a shiver. "I park it on the street at home. I think a truck mirror must've hit it during the night. My dad doesn't know about it yet. I didn't even have time to clean up the broken glass this morning."

"It's hard to believe nobody heard that much noise in your neighborhood during the night. And that wasn't any accident, either. Somebody smashed in that

window with a sledgehammer or a baseball bat." She made no comment while he entered a note on a file card. "What time do you get off work?"

"Five."

"Are you going to be here tomorrow?"

"I don't know. Mrs. Hafkar has to be on call for jury duty through Friday. They want me to stay till the end of the week, but . . ."

"They didn't give you any trouble about what happened today, did they?"

"You mean about Uncle Seth getting killed? No."

"Would you mind waiting here in the car for a minute while I go back and talk to them? You can shut that vent partway if it's blowing on you."

Once again when he reentered the office he had the feeling he had interrupted a tense scene. "Sorry to bother you, I know you are busy, but I want to pin something down if I can. There seems to be a discrepancy about when you went to lunch, Mr. Hafkar."

"Discrepancy? What does that little gal say?"

"She says you were still here when she left at a quarter to one."

Hafkar pursed his lips, blinked hard twice, and nodded to himself. "You should probably believe her. This jury duty thing has me all mixed up. I'm usually out all afternoon making deliveries or writing up estimates for contractors." He nodded again, more decisively. "I guess maybe I was still here when she left."

"You said a while ago that you picked up Mrs. Hafkar in Saxtown for lunch. What time would that have been, Mrs. Hafkar?"

She looked up from a sheaf of invoices and stared at a distant point to concentrate her thoughts.

"They let us go at twelve, and I waited probably twenty or thirty minutes before Frank got there."

"Then, since it would take him almost half an hour to get to Saxtown from here, he had to have left here right around twelve." He turned toward Hafkar. "Just like you said before."

Hafkar nodded some more and spread his hands in a broad shrug. "Yeah, well, that's what I thought, but—"

"You'd better have Sherrin get her times straight," said Mrs. Hafkar. "She's not too good with numbers if these phone orders she wrote up are any indication."

"But whatever time you left, Mr. Hafkar, you *are* sure Mr. Babbitt was alive then?"

"Certain of it. He opened the gate for me and shut it after me. From the shed down there. Last I saw of him he was taking a drink from a bottle he always keeps—kept—in the shed."

"Did he do a lot of drinking while he was working?"

"I'd say he put away a gallon a day."

Mrs. Hafkar gave forth clucks of disapprobation. "He's dead, Frank. Don't make jokes about him."

"He never drank anything but water," explained Hafkar. "He had five or six plastic jugs of it

stashed around the yard. There's one of them under the counter."

"Better not touch it. Our evidence technician will want to go over it. He'll probably be up here in another few minutes. He won't bother you any more than he has to, but I'll warn you right now, he's thorough."

He left them pondering that in somber silence and went outside, to find Kestrel demonstrating his thoroughness by going through a trash barrel with the avidity of a tramp who hasn't eaten in three days.

As soon as the body of Uncle Seth was removed to the city mortuary, the crowd along the fence began to evaporate. Stamaty followed the ambulance out through the gate. At five o'clock Sherrin went home without having promised definitely to come back. Patrolman Bystrom, now technically off duty, was playing sorcerer's apprentice by holding specimen containers for Kestrel, filling out labels, taking measurements with a spring tape, and adding details to a sketch map of the scene. At five thirty Auburn radioed Lieutenant Savage to report briefly on the investigation's progress.

"Don't put the shovel away yet, Cy," said Savage. "While you've been out there in the boonies counting pebbles, I've been doing your homework for you."

"Oh yes? How's that?"

"Checking out these license numbers you phoned in. One of them set off some bells. It belongs to that car that was found abandoned and out of gas at Rol-



land State Park on Sunday afternoon."

"Where was that number on the list?"

"Fourth."

"Then that car must have been here at the yard one day last week. Did they ever find the driver?"

"The owner's still missing. He's an FBI agent, Robert Destro; his chief says he'd been investigating thefts of building materials from two government projects in the north part of the state." Auburn pulled a sheaf of blank forms out of his inside coat pocket and started turning through them.

"You still there, Cy? You didn't faint or anything, did you?"

"Not yet. Some bells are ringing here, too, that's all."

"Take a couple of deep breaths, and call me in the morning."

Instead Auburn tried to place calls to a manufacturer of concrete pipe in Indiana and a dealer in structural steel in North Carolina and learned that neither firm existed.

The Hafkars had left to get something to eat, and the last of the watchers along the fence had drifted away when, around eight o'clock, Bystrom and Kestrel found the second body under a pile of cedar fencing in a remote corner of the yard. Agent Destro had been dead for some time, probably since before his car had been ditched in the woods. His right temple had been caved in, probably with a crowbar.

Auburn scowled at the remains with distaste and exasperation. "This is getting ugly," he said.

"Nobody said it was a Nancy Drew mystery," said Kestrel. "Are you going to call Stamaty to come back out here, or shall we wish that job on Bystrom?"

On their return from dinner the Hafkars denied ever having seen or heard of Destro, and a search of the records in the office didn't turn up anything bearing his name. Not that anybody thought he had visited the yard last week to buy sand.

The next day dawned, or rather failed to do so, amid a steamy tropical drizzle. Nine o'clock found Auburn back in court at the interminable Boettcher hearing. As he sat waiting to be called, his mind was on Uncle Seth and Agent Destro, with the circumstances of whose deaths Kestrel, Stamaty, and company were presently concerning themselves. He stared across the courtroom at the jury box, which was empty, since this was only a preliminary hearing. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. The jury is out. Hung jury, rigged jury, jury-rigged . . .

The court took frequent breaks to get its wits together, and during each break Auburn phoned Savage. The data came trickling in. Nothing was known to the prejudice of the Hafkars. Juanita Hafkar née Marquez had once taught cooking and sewing at Saxtown High School. Frank Hafkar was a partner in a small printing business in Saxtown—a silent partner ever since he had gone to work for his wife's Uncle Seth. Seth himself had scarcely been a model citizen—chronical-

ly in debt and often in trouble with tax authorities, building inspectors, and the Better Business Bureau, but with no criminal convictions. Sherrin Holst had just graduated from high school with a B average and letters in volleyball and field hockey. Her father was an insurance broker.

Seth Babbitt had died of asphyxiation, suffocated by the weight of pit run under which he had been buried. The blood on the crowbar was the same type as Destro's.

Kestrel had been at the yard since sunup, along with two FBI agents and a search warrant. Hafkar was there, too, fuming over lost business, since the CLOSED sign was still on the gate.

Auburn was called to the stand just before the noon-recess, spoke his piece in about four minutes, and was discharged. Over lunch in the canteen at headquarters he held a hurried conference with Lieutenant Savage.

Then he spent half an hour tracking down Sherrin Holst. After questioning her on the phone about events at the yard on the day Destro had died, and drawing blanks, he persuaded her with considerable difficulty to go back there with him. From the moment he picked her up at home until they arrived at Babbitt's she sat with eyes front; only the slashing of the windshield wipers broke the silence in the car.

Auburn had to honk three times before the gate rolled open. The rain had turned the supply yard

into a steaming morass. They picked their way among puddles and rivulets to the office steps and stopped to scrape slimy mud from their shoes on the edge of the bottom step as others had done before them.

They found both Hafkars in the office, him puttering restlessly and her telling a steady stream of phone callers that the yard was closed until further notice. Auburn had known they were there, but they didn't know he was coming or who was coming with him. Juanita Hafkar's manner towards Sherrin was chilly to say the least, and her husband's twitching jowl and jerking limbs betokened overpowering anxiety.

"I'll come right to the point," said Auburn, taking some printed forms from his pocket and holding them up so they could all see them. "I want some answers about these blank invoices, which are all from building supply wholesalers that don't exist."

Hafkar examined the forms and passed them to his wife. "Never seen them before," he said.

"I think you have. Right now you're wondering where I found these, since you thought you got rid of all of them yesterday while I was out of the office. But even if I can't prove you ever had a supply of these blanks in your possession, I found twelve of them in various places in your files—dated, filled out, and signed by fictitious people for fictitious deliveries of materials. So somebody around here's been doing some creative writing."

Sherrin stood quietly next to the fan, staring at the clock. Nobody met his eyes. Nobody said anything. Drops of rain pattered erratically on the iron roof.

"And I don't imagine we'll have much trouble proving that the materials specified in those invoices were stolen from building sites at night and brought here to be sold. The FBI men out there have already identified two lots of pipe that came from a federal building project in Latonia, and they're just starting."

Mrs. Hafkar cleared her throat. "We were afraid Uncle Seth was up to something like that, but we never knew what it was."

"Before you say anything more, you ought to know that our lab people are presently comparing some of these forms with samples of printing from Royal Fancy, Mr. Hafkar's company."

The shot went home. "That was Uncle Seth's idea," said Hafkar. "I ran some forms for him from time to time. What he did with them was his business."

"I doubt if a court would take that view, particularly since a murder's involved—the murder of a persistent investigator who wasn't fooled by the fake forms and did some checking of lot numbers on steel pipe."

"We never saw that man, or even heard of him," protested Mrs. Hafkar stridently, "and you can't prove we did."

"Okay. Say Uncle Seth killed him. Then who killed Uncle Seth?"

"Well, you surely don't still think we had anything to do with

that?" said Hafkar. He glared at Sherrin. "Haven't you got those times straight yet?"

"I'm working on it." Auburn showed Sherrin a crumpled slip of paper. "Remember this? 'Burger, fries, Cold Crock, \$2.49. Thanks for popping into Pop's?' Yesterday's date and the time, twelve-oh-eight P.M. So you must have left here yesterday for lunch about forty-five minutes earlier than you said."

"That's right," admitted Sherrin sulkily. "And he was still here when I left." She indicated Hafkar with a jerk of her chin.

"Why did you lie about what time you ate yesterday?"

"I'll tell you why," said Mrs. Hafkar. "Because she killed Uncle Seth."

Sherrin started to cry and crumpled up, nearly falling into the fan.

"Let's see if we can't get this all sorted out," said Auburn, striving for a suitable blend of compassion and authority. "What happened to your car, miss? The truth this time."

She took a facial tissue out of her purse and used it. "Uncle Seth smashed in the window. He caught me—I'd better start at the beginning. Yesterday morning I was talking to my friend on the phone. I was sitting here on the floor watching down the steps so I wouldn't get caught. I ran my hand along the wall over that electric outlet, and it came loose. It isn't really an outlet, it's a little box, and it had keys in it. I put it back, but after lunch nobody was around except Uncle Seth out in

the yard so I got out the keys and looked in all the files."

Mrs. Hafkar muttered an unseemly epithet that wasn't entirely drowned by the fan.

"In that drawer I found a box of bill forms from different companies—all blank, and only the yellow customer's copies. I figured they were doing something illegal with them, so I took some out to my car. But Uncle Seth sneaked up behind me and tried to get them away from me.

"I jumped inside the car, and that's when he smashed in the window. I couldn't drive away because the gate was closed. I got away from him and started to run back here. I was going to lock myself in and phone for help. I ducked under the hopper, and he came right under it after me and—I guess I lost my head. I went on out the other side and flipped the lever—" She broke off, shivering. "Then I put the dog's chain over the lever so it would look like an accident and called the police."

"What about that argument you said you heard Uncle Seth having yesterday morning?"

"I just made that up," she sighed, seemingly with more pride than remorse.

Auburn moved toward the door. "We need to go downtown," he told Sherrin, "so you can sign a statement. Minus any creative embellishments."

"Am I under arrest?"

"No." He turned to the Hafkars. "You need a lawyer," he told them matter-of-factly. "The federal authorities are going to press charges for theft of government property, and they're in a pretty rotten mood after what happened to their man."

"We don't know anything about that," repeated Mrs. Hafkar, her eyes like slits.

"That remains to be seen. The police investigation isn't over yet."

In the car Sherrin was distraught but no longer tearful. "I'm sure they figured out yesterday what happened," she said. "They, like, told me they'd cover for me if I didn't let on about the forms."

"What were you planning to do with those forms?"

"Turn them over to the police."

"Are you sure you weren't planning to do a little investigative reporting, alias blackmail?"

"Nothing like that. I hadn't even had time to think about it."

"You had enough time to snatch two rolls of dimes and two rolls of quarters from the cash drawer while you had it open. I found them under your car seat along with the blank invoices."

Only the slashing of the windshield wipers broke the silence as they finished the ride to headquarters.

FICTION

# HOARE AND THE FROG PRINCE

Wilder  
Perkins

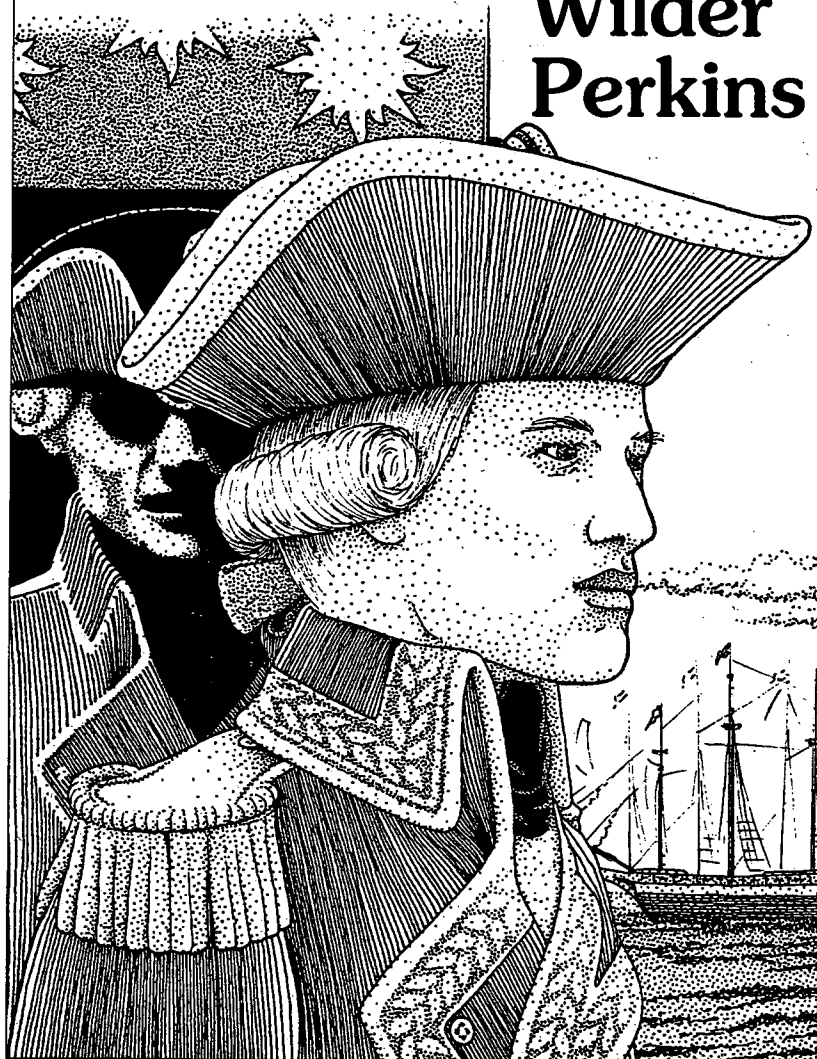


Illustration by Friedrich Haas.

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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 2/99

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“Someone has been here before us, I see.”

The challenged party did his best to sound casual, but his voice quavered and his belly rumbled audibly as he and his second looked down at the figure sprawled in the moonlit snow. The body's caped boat-cloak spread wide to display a peculiar naval uniform. Its hat, a gold-braided tricorne, lay beside one outflung hand.

A stout, florid merchant of Portsmouth town, the challenged party had never been out before. Now, at sight of the sword blade protruding from the dead man's massive chest and the pool of frozen blood beneath its parted lips, he felt he would rather apologize, go home to bed, sleep till noon, and forget the whole thing.

With a cheerful squeak of wheels in the snow, a chaise approached up the hill from town. Three cloaked figures alighted. “What have you gotten up to now, Golightly?” asked the shortest one. His breath smoked in the frosty air.

“You must not speak to my principal, Mr. Derrick,” said the merchant's second. “Besides, when we arrived, the man was lying right here, just the way he is now. What about him, Edwards?”

The third of the trio from the chaise set down his surgeon's bag, stooped over the body, shook it. Ice crackled, and the body stirred in one piece like a fallen statue. The embedded blade vibrated slightly.

“Dead, gentlemen. Quite dead.”

All five standing men removed their hats. The two seated high on the chaise followed suit; one crossed himself. “Wonder who he was.”

“Looks like a Frog to me,” another said. “Still wears lace to his wrists.”

“Look here, Derrick,” the merchant said, “I don't think it would be respectful to the dead man, whoever he is, to pursue our little disagreement any further. Will you accept my apology?”

“Of course, my dear fellow. Let us blame overindulgence in the mayor's negus for that little lapse, shall we?” While patronizing, the challenger's voice was distinctly relieved.

“Here now,” he went on. “It's downhill all the way home. Climb in, all of you. We'll stir 'em up at The George and drink to our old friendship in a bowl of his punch.”

“But what about the body?”

“Oh, we'll leave Farley here till the watch comes for it,” Mason said airily. “He's an old seadog; he won't mind a bit of cold. Besides, a shilling will see him right. You, Farley!”

The groom climbed stiffly from his perch and watched his master's chaise disappear down the slope into Portsmouth town, leaving him to keep warm as best he might in the growing dawn. “Hell,” he said softly but distinctly.

Admiral Sir George Hardcastle was as burdened as ever with the



endless demands on his time as port admiral. Now, however, the demands were from the host of officers put on half pay when their ships were laid up at the signing of peace with Bonaparte at Amiens. In order to reach the admiral's private office in answer to his peremptory summons, Bartholomew Hoare must needs whisper his apologies while edging past post captains by the handful and lieutenants by the score. The poor penniless mids must shiver outside.

For once, Hoare whispered to himself, the Fates had at least been perversely merciful to *him*. He had cursed those damned goddesses when a musket bullet from the frigate *Eole* had crushed his larynx at the Glorious First of June; his curses had been even more heartfelt when he had been beached forever because he could no longer speak above a horrid rasping whisper. But now, having held down the job of general dogsbody to the port admiral since '94, he had escaped the axe and could still enjoy the full pay of a lieutenant, RN. Slender the stipend might be, but his pocket was no lighter now than that of most of the half-pay captains past whom he was dodging. Moreover, he had mercifully hoarded the prize money gained at sea so long ago instead of squandering it like most of his shipmates.

"The admiral has been awaiting you this half hour, Mr. Hoare," Patterson, the admiral's clerk, said reproachfully. "Go right in as soon as he has disposed of Captain Pottle." The clerk shook his grizzled head. "Poor Pottle, he hasn't a hope of a ship." Pottle had been a client of Earl Blake, but Blake had died, drunk and in debt, and Pottle's interest at the Board of Admiralty had died with him.

The hapless Pottle emerged, looking hangdog, and Hoare slipped his lanky, silent self past him.

"You have kept your superior officer waiting, Hoare, and not for the first time. I must remind you that any of those hungry idlers out there would leap at the chance of taking your place."

The admiral's face was neither more nor less red than usual, so Hoare concluded that the remark was a mere matter of habit. He stood fast and waited.

"The Duc de Provins is dead, Hoare. You know him, of course?"

"Know of him, sir." As a Bourbon of the French blood royal, albeit an illegitimate one, Provins' place in the world was as far above Hoare's as Hoare's was above that of a sea urchin. But Hoare knew him by sight. The two nations, he remembered, always at odds if not at actual war, were wont to harbor each other's exiled monarchs and their courts, like so much dirty laundry taken in pawn. When Louis XVI had lost his useless head and the Dauphin been left to die of neglect, the new head of the family, Louis-Stanislas-Xavier, had established his yawn-filled powerless court at Hartwell Castle. Provins had soon wearied of his gross, kindly half-brother and moved to Portsmouth. Here he had taken full advantage of his nominal rank as ad-

miral in His Most Christian Majesty's hypothetical fleet to throw his weight about in Royal Navy circles.

Hoare had seen the duc several times in the *salon d'escrime* of his own instructor, the Vicomte Marc-Antoine de Châtillon de Barsac. His royal highness had visibly relished poking fun at these awkward Englishmen who thrust away so earnestly at each other with De Barsac's foils and sabres. But he had not been above taking up the occasional foil himself, and he had acquitted himself well enough.

"Well," said Sir George, "a pair of cits went up to the common this morning to settle some petty matter of honor. Found His Grace there all by himself in the snow with a sword through his heart. There'll be hell to pay at the Foreign Office.

"And hell to pay at the Admiralty, for that matter. I hope you didn't know it, Hoare, but he was in our pay, too. Kept us abreast of the politics of our opposite numbers in Napoleon's navy. Don't know how he managed to keep abreast himself, but there you are. You speak French, don't you, Hoare?"

"Yes, sir." Indeed he did. Nearly twenty years ago, when he was second in *Staghound*, Hoare had left his beloved, gently born French-Canadian bride Antoinette ashore in Halifax, to die in childbirth without him. He had never seen his daughter; the infant's grandparents had swept her away before he returned. He had never even learned her name.

"Well, I want you to keep a weather eye out on the matter, on the navy's behalf. I don't trust the mayor's men to get to the bottom of anything but a mug of Oh-Be-Joyful. They've taken up De Barsac. Seems our royal duke was sent to his Maker by one of the swords at the viscount's school. Can't see why they don't have barons and earls like civilized people. Anyhow, see to it, Hoare."

Hoare heard these words with dismay. Before fleeing France in '93 just ahead of the guillotine, De Barsac had been an able frigate captain and an honorable enemy. Now, besides being Hoare's instructor, he was his friend. And with a sinking of the stomach, it came back to him that the taverns had been abuzz last night with the news that His Grace and the *maître* had engaged in a snarling match upon the floor of the latter's own establishment.

"They sounded like a pair of tomcats, if you ask me," Hoare's informant had said. "I half expected De Barsac to draw on the duke. There would *really* have been the devil to pay then, and no pitch hot."

"Aye aye, sir," he whispered to the admiral, and left.

Hands thrust into the pockets of his heavy caped surtout, Hoare trudged up the road along which his late royal highness had preceded him. The watch would surely have lugged the body back down by now. They would not have dropped it at the town's charnel house, of

course; the remains of a prince of the blood, since he had been French and therefore popish, would have been taken to the local Catholic church. In any case, Hoare had judged, the corporeal evidence would keep for awhile, while he knew the evidence at the scene of the crime would last only as long as the arctic weather.

He found the spot easily enough. The pool of frozen blood glared up at him from yards away. The snow around it was overwritten by dozens of footprints; it would be far beyond Hoare's feeble tracking ability to determine how many men had been up here last night, let alone who they might have been and their business here. The marks of two sets of wheels lay not far off. The duelists' chaise explained one, of course, but how about the other?

Aha! Hoare cried exultantly to himself before he remembered that the mayor's men would have used a cart to carry away the noble body. He turned and went back down the hill. He might as well find out if the dead duc had anything to tell him.

The dead duc lay in informal state in a small chapel of Portsmouth's only popish place of worship, candles at his head and feet. The place was icy cold as Hoare saw from the state of the stoup of holy water at the chapel door. It would be too soon, of course, for the sorrowing relatives to have arrived from Hartwell; in fact, word of their loss could hardly have reached them. But Hoare was surprised at the absence of any members of the duc's local entourage. A solitary nun knelt at the tiny altar, praying, he supposed, for the soul of the departed.

Except that someone had tied up the duc's jaw and withdrawn the murder weapon, the body must look the same as it had when the duelists stood over it; arms and legs akimbo, it stared glassily toward heaven. The blood had not been fully removed from its face. Below the old fashioned cuffs of Mechlin lace, the fingers were bare. The duc had chewed his fingernails, Hoare noted with mild distaste.

The duc's hat lay on his belly just below the entry wound. It was a gold-braided, plumed admiral's hat, in the old fashioned tricorn shape affected by Lord Nelson in preference to today's fore-and-aft style. The contents of the victim's pockets lay beside their owner, with the murder weapon. The purse was all but empty as Hoare found when he inverted it over one hand; it contained only a few louis d'or. Hoare remembered that nobility seldom stooped to handling lucre, leaving that sort of thing to their underlings. There was a Breguet repeater watch—gold, of course. A fine lawn kerchief bore the duc's crest. That was all.

Something was missing. What could it be?

Hoare picked up the sword. About a third of the way toward the hilt the tip had been broken off, so there was no way he could tell if the point had been buttoned, shielded, or left with its original, lethal sharpness.

In any case, Hoare told himself, it was moot, for the remaining stub was more than sharp enough, he thought, to pierce through the layers of the duc's clothing, through his skin and on between his ribs to the heart. As if in confirmation, most of the remaining blade bore bloodstains. The mayor's men had needed no particular deductive skill to trace the source of the weapon, for the inch-wide brass guard bore De Barsac's distinctive monogram. He knew it well. Now to question the dueling cits.

Upon opening the chapel door to leave, Hoare found himself staring into a pair of huge, cold, violet eyes nearly a foot below his own. Their owner looked him up and down. An elderly, ugly maid hung at the person's heels.

*"Alors, m'sieur, qu'est-ce que vous faites ici?"*

"I might ask you the same, mademoiselle," Hoare whispered in the same tongue. "Permit me to present myself: Bartholomew Hoare, *lieutenant de vaisseau, à votre service*. I am here upon the orders of Admiral Sir George Hardcastle—" he stopped to take a breath—"to investigate the death of His Royal Highness the Duc de Provins. And you, mademoiselle?"

"Madame la comtesse, if you please, monsieur. Iphegénie, Comtesse de Montrichard. You may tell your admiral there is nothing to investigate. It is well known throughout the town that De Barsac killed him."

With that, the comtesse swept past him, followed by her dragon. She crossed herself perfunctorily before knéeing at the raised bier. He saw those violet eyes scan the objects beside the corpse as her lips moved. Her expression suggested to Hoare that she was not so much reciting prayers as conversing with the corpse.

In no time she was on her feet again. "Never *mind*, Jeannette," she said as she shook off the dragon's offered arm. Then she turned to Hoare. "There, you see. He does not bleed, does he? You are my witness, monsieur; how fortunaté it is for me that you were here to witness."

Hoare's expression must have revealed his confusion.

"Or perhaps you English do not believe the superstition that a body bleeds again in the presence of its murderer. Eh?" She looked challengingly up into Hoare's long face.

"I fear I lack some piece of information, madame la comtesse, which you believe me to possess. Pray enlighten me."

She snorted in an aristocratic way. "You did not know, then, that in our little French coterie at least I am supposed to have been the last person to see Provins alive? A fine ferret, indeed, that your Admiral Sir Hardcastle picked out to find the one who killed him."

"And *were* you the last person to see him alive?"

"No," she said flatly. "The last to *leave* him alive, perhaps, but not the last to *see* him. That privilege belonged to his killer, not to me. To the Vicomte de Barsac, if your lumps of mayor's men are correct."

"Then perhaps madame la comtesse would have the kindness to tell me about her last encounter with his late royal highness," Hoare whispered.

"What, *here*?" she asked. "In this place, and in this frigid air? No indeed, monsieur. You may escort me to my lodgings if you will, such as they are, and interrogate me there."

"It would be an honor, madame."

She took his arm, summoned her dragon, and steered him down through the town's icy streets, to bring him up all standing before the staring guardian of The Three Suns' majestic door.

The Three Suns bore the reputation of housing only Britain's highest and their very good friends when those friends were not such as to be announced to the world. Hoare's only previous visits there had been as a message-bearer from the port admiral to these personages. But after suppressing a raised eyebrow upon sighting him, the porter flung the door open with a flourish. He greeted madame la comtesse in execrable French, and added, "*Good morning*, Mr. 'Oare. And a fine, frosty morning it is, Mr. 'Oare."

"Good morning, Pollard."

Pollard's eyes and ears were always open wide, and his mouth as well, at least for those who paid him to open them and for those, like Hoare, of whom he walked in dread. To Pollard and his cronies Hoare was The Whispering Ferret.

The comtesse and her abigail mounted the wide stair, leaving Hoare to follow. At the door to what must be her chambers she stood aside for the woman to unlock and open it. The salon within had been refurnished since '98 when Hoare had last seen it; chairs, sofas, and accessories, aglow in the low morning sun of winter, were all in the chaste Directoire style, fresh from Paris. The French government in exile, Hoare mused, might have its pockets to let, but its members still managed to eat cake.

The comtesse let her woman relieve her of her heavy cloak. Beneath it she stood lightly clad as if for summer, in a pale, nearly transparent figured silk, tucked demurely just beneath her breasts. Hoare handed the dragon his own cloak and cocked hat. The comtesse seated herself, semi-reclining, on a chaise longue and gestured to Hoare to take a matching chair. She began without preamble.

"As I said, I was the last person to see the late duc except for the person who killed him. You evidently did not know that, very conveniently, the Comte de Montrichard and I live apart. We do not—er—suit. Until his death, his royal highness occupied these premises. With me."

Equally evidently, Hoare thought, the comtesse wanted him to understand this relationship without any doubt at all.

"Why are you telling me these things, madame la comtesse?"

"Because you asked, monsieur. And because I find your whisper intriguing. Why *do* you whisper, by-the-by?"

"A French bullet, madame la comtesse," he whispered.

"*Je suis désolée*," she said dismissively.

"Will you tell me what took place between you and the duc yesterday evening?"

"What leads you to believe it was yesterday evening, Monsieur 'Oare?"

"I hardly know," Hoare admitted. He felt his face redden.

"It was not yesterday evening, monsieur, but yesterday noon, after the morning post came from 'Artwell. He had withdrawn into his work-room to read it. It was when he emerged that he gave me my congé."

"*Tout court?* Just like that?"

"No. He was gentlemanly, I admit—and gentle." The comtesse winced; she looked away.

"Tell me what he said, please," Hoare whispered.

"I . . . he told me that his brother had ordered him to return to his duchesse, in 'Artwell. He must obey, of course; after all, Louis is the head of the family. So . . . that was that, monsieur." She shrugged expressively. "He bade me adieu, kissed my hand, and left."

"No—ah—farewell gift?"

"No. He merely said, and I think I remember his exact words, 'You will know soon the extent of my gratitude.'"

"Do you know what he meant?"

"No, monsieur."

"And then?"

"That was all. I intend, monsieur, to bring his murderer to justice. Provins may have given me my congé last night, but that was his good right as one of our royal family. He was kind to me and generous, and I respected him. We even took some of his long walks together."

So the duc often took walks, sometimes with his mistress, sometimes not. She would have had nowhere to go now, save to a husband whom she detested and whom she could no longer support. Rejected and desperate, she could, Hoare thought, have appealed for a last promenade in the moonlit snow and, upon receiving her final dismissal, drawn the broken sword from beneath her cloak and dispatched her royal lover.

"And then?" he repeated.

"My husband arrived in the afternoon with a lackey, to remove Guillaume's—the duc's—belongings. That was all."

Hoare was silent for a spell, then rose to take his leave. "Permit me to offer my condolences, madame la comtesse," he whispered.

"None are necessary, Monsieur 'Oare. After all, it was *une affaire du cour, pas une affaire de coeur*." She smiled bitterly.

By this feeble pun the comtesse told Hoare that it was an affair of



the court and not of the heart. She would not meet his eyes nonetheless but stared out the window as he made his bow and departed.

Hoare went in search of the combative cits who had discovered the duc's body. It took him nearly the rest of the day to find them, their seconds, and the surgeon who had pronounced the corpse a corpse, and interrogate them. None had anything useful to tell him. Both principals were suffering from fresh hangovers; all members of the party would prefer to put the whole matter out of their minds. So, after stopping at a food shop for a piece of roast beef slapped between two slices of bread (Lord Sandwich's recent invention) Hoare proceeded to the Portsmouth bridewell. He was known here.

"Friend of yours, Mr. 'Oare, I suspects," said the port-faced bailiff on duty when Hoare asked to see De Barsac. "Decent man for a Frog, I'd say, even if 'e did do 'is lordship in. 'Ere you are, sir. Thanky, sir."

The prisoner was small, leathery, gloomy looking. He looked up as Hoare hove into sight. "You! I might have known. I did not kill him, you know." De Barsac's English was precise though heavily accented.

"I am sure you did not," Hoare whispered. "But the evidence is strong against you. After all, you and Provins—" he stopped for breath—"had words the other day, and all the world saw it. Then, sometime last night, he was killed by one of the swords you keep for your students."

"Your first point is true," De Barsac said. "We had very harsh words. As to your second point, I must believe what you say. But I was not present at the event, so I can tell you nothing of the weapon used."

"Tell me about your contretemps with the duc."

"I was surprised, 'Oare, at the news he gave me. I would have expected better of him, for he had the reputation of being a man of his word. More so at least than some others of his family."

"What was the news that surprised you so?"

"That I was not to have *Vendée*. She had been promised me as soon as your admiralty released her to ours. She was to go to Dominique Monrichard."

Hoare was about to ask him what Vendée might be, besides the rebellious, royalist French province, but then remembered. By some back room arrangement among the French court-in-exile, the admiralty, and the Foreign Ministry, a few old decayed vessels of the Royal Navy, instead of being laid up in ordinary or broken up, were to be sold to Louis XVIII at pence in the pound. Once again the lily banner of the *ancien régime* could fly at sea. For a monarchy without a country to rule, it was a matter of pride.

Hoare remembered too, ruefully, that *Vendée* had once been the *Eole* frigate from whose main top a French marine had fired the shot that broke his larynx and his career. Since his *Staghound* had taken her in

the same action, Hoare would have been put into her as commander as a matter of course, and he would have been made instead of broken. Now the French navy was to have her back. It was bitter.

"Forgive me, my friend," Hoare said, "but the gods of our admiralty, at least, are capricious. Like your seamen, we English sailors must learn to weather that kind of blow."

"But she was to go to Montrichard. Montrichard, *parbleu!*" Barsac breathed scorn like fire. "Dominique Benoît Jean-Baptiste de Montrichard, who could hardly take a skiff out of La Rochelle without putting her on the rocks! Simply because the upstart is a comte and his equerry, while I, Marc-Antoine de Châtillon de Barsac, am a mere vicomte. Or because of his liaison with the lovely comtesse."

"Then why did you not kill Montrichard instead of the duc?"

"I remind you, 'Oare, I killed no one. I was angry at the duc, yes. But not à tuer, mon ami, not angry to kill. I merely protested a decision that I had not expected and did not deserve.

"Why, I had even begun conversations with Marciello, that dancing master of a man, to sell him my academy so that my wife could live decently while I was at sea in *Vendée*. Now, here I am, immured, without a ship, without my liberty. It is too much, 'Oare, too much. My poor wife . . ." De Barsac stared vacantly at the wet stone wall a mere four feet from his nose.

"Keep up your spirits, man," Hoare whispered, though he had no tangible support to offer the prisoner.

As he left the lockup, someone pulled at his cloak. The face beneath the shawl, tight-clutched against the cold, was no lady's; her complexion was too coarse. But she looked respectable, so Hoare did not pull free. She might be a lady's maid.

"Zur, zur!" she exclaimed.

"Yes?"

"Would you be Mr. 'Oare, zur?" She blushed. Hoare was long resigned to seeing blushes on young women's faces the first time they used his name. At least they seldom snickered, as did some men who did not know that, while Bartholomew Hoare had yet to kill his man, he had yet to miss whatever part of an opponent he chose for target.

"The same," he whispered, and waited. She gave a little bob.

"I be Molly, zur, Madame de Barsac's maid." The girl spoke with a strong Dorset buzz.

"Yes, Molly?"

"Ma'am wonders, zur, if you'd kindly step by and zee 'er for a moment or two?"

"Lead the way, Molly," Hoare said, though he needed no guide to this destination.

He followed close on her heels to a decent but shabby building. The sign at the door read:

MARC-ANTOINE DE CHÂTILLON DE BARSAC  
MAÎTRE D'ESCRIME  
ENGLISH SPOKEN  
ENQUIRE ABOVE

Molly led him down an alley behind the school, into a rear doorway and up two flights of stairs. Here she opened an inner door and bobbed again for him to precede her.

"Mr. 'Oare, mum," she whispered, and blushed again.

Her hand outstretched, her mistress advanced to greet him. A woman-shaped woman, she would be a few years younger than her husband or Hoare.

"Madame la Vicomtesse," Hoare whispered as he made his leg and bent over the hand. Actually to kiss it would have been unduly suggestive.

"So kind of you, Mr. 'Oare," she said in French. "My husband has spoken of you often."

"I am told he has been taken up in connection with the sad death of the Duc de Provins," Hoare said.

"Which is why I told Molly to find you and beg you to wait on me. He had nothing to do with it, of course."

"Of course. But the town authorities believe otherwise, and one can hardly blame them. After all, he is known to have quarreled with the duc, and his broken sword was the murder weapon."

"Anyone, monsieur," she said, "could have filched a broken sword from our salon. Marc-Antoine collects them in a corner. I record them and then sell them to Tompkins the cutler, for we cannot afford weapons of a quality high enough to be worth repair."

"How often is a weapon broken?"

"Perhaps two a week. There are some awkward pupils who break one almost every lesson. They are hopeless, and I charge them extra for the breakage."

"Then you keep the books for your husband?"

The vicomtesse nodded.

A notion tiptoed reluctantly into Hoare's mind. "Could the Comtesse de Montrichard have acquired one of the broken swords?" he asked.

"Why yes, I suppose she could. She sometimes accompanied the duc, especially if he wanted to display his proficiency by taking up a blade himself."

"She would come with her husband, I presume?"

"Hardly, monsieur. That would have been gauche in the extreme, would it not?"

"And about yesterday's quarrel between the duc and your husband?"

"It was hardly a quarrel," she said. "Provins took Marc-Antoine aside and told him that instead of giving command of *Vendée* to him he

must give it to Montrichard. My husband had been counting on obtaining the post; it had become a matter of honor as well as the pocketbook. He protested, too vehemently, perhaps. The duc turned on his heel and left the salon, followed, of course, by his attendant."

"Who was . . ."

"The comtesse." Her eyes opened wide. "Why, the comte was there as well. How *louche*! Yes, I remember now. Montrichard was already practicing when the duc arrived, before the mirror, of course, being the sort of person he is."

"So, madame, any of four people could have taken away the broken sword."

"*Four, monsieur?*"

"Yes. The Comte de Montrichard, his comtesse, your husband . . . or you."

"Monsieur!" Her lip curled. For a moment Hoare feared she would order him to the door, but then she laughed. "Yes, I too, I suppose, although you are not to know I can hardly tell which end of the weapon to hold. But then you must add to your list of suspects every pupil of my husband, past or present."

Hoare shuddered at the thought and dismissed it.

"Well, madame la vicomtesse, I have now spoken with you, your husband and the Comtesse de Montrichard. It remains for me to question the comte." Having run out of breath, Hoare merely raised his eyebrows hopefully. She caught his meaning.

"He keeps chambers at The Lilies in Dover Street, I believe," she said. "I hope you will be able to establish my husband's innocence, monsieur. Strange though it may seem, our children and I love him."

"I share your hope, madame." With that Hoare prepared to take his leave, leaving unspoken his fear that powerful evidence indeed would be needed if De Barsac were to depart the Portsmouth bridewell unhanged.

"*Un moment, monsieur,*" said the vicomtesse. She disappeared into an adjoining room, returning with a paper in her hand. "As I told you, I handle my husband's business affairs. Here is the commission Provins gave him, days ago. Perhaps you will believe me."

"It is not I who must be convinced, madame, but an English jury. May I take this with me?"

She shrugged. "It will be no use to him if he is dead, monsieur. Take it, then."

De Montrichard's "chambers" might be no more than a pair of garret rooms at The Lilies, one in a warren of similar quarters let out to titled emigré paupers, but he kept a lackey nonetheless, and he or the lackey kept Hoare pacing the low corridor outside his door for a half-hour's eternity.

The comte received him in a bare bleak chamber. It smelled of damp plaster and contained one hard chair, one desk, and a number of spanking-new seachests and boxes. Hoare had, he guessed, caught him in mid-move. Some, he saw, bore different crests. Could they, or some of them, belong to the late duc?

The comte's pale, narrow face was set in lines of sour and apparently permanent disapproval. He wore the same oddly different naval uniform that Hoare had seen on the duc's body, and like the duc's, the heavy bullion epaulettes he wore on each shoulder could never have seen salt air.

He received Hoare standing and began without greeting. "You have come here, I understand, to solicit information concerning the death of the Duc de Provins. Is that the case?" Hoare was not one to be outdone in matters of icy courtesy. He nodded assent and waited. "It should be obvious even to an Englishman," said the outwaited count at last, "that De Barsac killed him. Or perhaps you did not notice the provenance of the broken sword."

"I did, monsieur." Hoare waited again, counted fifteen of his slow pulses, and continued. "You are a member of his late grace's court, sir, I believe?"

"Your belief is in error. Until yesterday I was indeed a member of His Royal Highness's 'court,' as you are pleased to call it, though how it is any concern of yours escapes me entirely. In fact, I was his sole equerry. As for the comtesse my wife . . . that, now, was quite a different matter and is not one for discussion with you."

De Montrichard, Hoare said to himself, had probably been born sneering. Tucking the expression into his mental commonplace book for possible future use, he renewed the waiting game. Again he won; the count continued. "However, since yesterday I have had the honor to command His Most Christian Majesty's ship *Vendée*."

"Have you been read in, then?"

Montrichard visibly choked down an order for Hoare to take his questions and swallow them. Perhaps he recalled just in time that he would be at the mercy of Hoare's master for the fitting out of his new command, for he simply said, "In the *French* navy, monsieur, command takes effect when the officer receives his appointment, as I have." For the first time, the comte offered the honorific common between gentlemen. "Indeed, I have just returned from Admiralty House, where I presented the document in question to your admiral."

"My congratulations, then, *mon capitaine*," Hoare whispered. "And when do you actually board your new command?"

"As soon as arrangements for the ceremony of transfer have been completed. Tomorrow, I expect. You are, of course, welcome to be present."

To Hoare's ears the invitation lacked something of sincerity.

"I shall be overjoyed to accept," he answered as he made his farewell bow. He found himself more than curious to tread, as a guest, the quarterdeck he himself might have paced as commander. It would be a bittersweet experience, he expected.

At Admiralty House, the flag secretary, Patterson, informed him that the comte had, indeed, presented the precious document.

"It's right here," he said. He handed it over for Hoare to peruse. "Sir George is closeted with Captain Pottle again. Will that man take no for an answer? Never on your life, sir."

Except for being in French, the letter of appointment, crudely printed except for spaces where names were added in manuscript, was virtually identical to the form employed by the admiralty. A tidy signature and an ornate seal appeared at the foot of the paper.

"Made the translation myself for the poor duke last month," Patterson said with modest pride.

It had grown late. Hoare betook himself to his own quiet quarters at The Swallowed Anchor in the eastern part of the town.

The sky was was still an arctic blue the next morning when Hoare emerged into the street. Facing south, he was buffeted by a biting northerly breeze; he must needs hold onto his hat.

Hoare first returned to The Three Suns, where he asked the porter a question. Pollard demurred but upon being fixed with Hoare's glittering eye told him that no, the countess and that 'orrible maid had remained in her rooms from the time the late dook departed until she went out to view his corpse yesterday. Strike him blue if he wasn't telling God's truth.

As Hoare turned away, a worn notice struck his eye. Partially obscured by a recent playbill and partially obscuring an ancient recruiting poster, it read:

TO BE SOLD, UPON ATTRACTIVE TERMS  
A RECENTLY OVERHAULED SMALL BARGE  
CONVERTED FOR PLEASURE SAILING  
BY A NAVAL GENTLEMAN  
INQUIRE AT 14, Highbury Street, in care of MASON.

Ever since being forever barred from going to sea again as a naval officer, Hoare had itched at least to sail saltwater again. Upon the signing of peace, he had received a gratifying dividend on some of his shares in John Company. He had now questioned everyone he could think of, and he was at a loss. Perhaps a change in viewpoint would help. He shrugged and made his way to Highbury Street.

His smart rap on the door to Number 14 was answered by a squat



woman with a commanding look. To Hoare she bore the insignia of "landlady" as clearly as if the word had been tattooed across her red forehead. "About the yacht, advertised for sale," he whispered.

She looked him up and down. "Wait here," she said, and closed the door in Hoare's face. He did not catch the name she roared up the stairs within.

In a moment a blaring sneeze sounded from behind the door, and a fellow lieutenant emerged, wiping his streaming nose. He was about Hoare's own size and frame but appeared ten years or so younger. Like Cassius, Hoare thought, this officer wore a lean and hungry look; a mark on his unornamented left shoulder suggested that at one time he had held commander's rank. The eyes above the inflamed nose looked anxious. "You called about the yacht, sir?"

"Yes, sir," Hoare whispered. "Hoare, Bartholomew Hoare."

"Hornblower, sir. Horatio Hornblower."

"Not Hornblower of *Retribution*?"

"The same, sir," said the other.

"Oh dear," Hoare said. Hornblower's ill luck was well known. He had been made commander and brought to England the sloop *Retribution*—*Gaditana*, as she had been at the time of her capture in Samaná Bay. But then the commissioners had not confirmed his appointment because it had been made after peace had been signed. Now the wretch was being compelled to return, bit by precious bit, the pay he had drawn during his brief tenure in the rank.

"Would your cold prevent you from showing me your craft?"

"Not at all, sir. Happy. This way."

Hornblower did not return for an outer garment but raised the collar of his uniform coat to protect his ears, hunched his shoulders, and thrust his hands into his pockets. He sneezed.

It came out as the two betook themselves to the berth of the vessel in question that during his happy few weeks as master and commander in *Retribution* Hornblower had indulged himself by squandering his prize money on a small naval barge and refitting it as a yacht in which he could carry himself and a companion on short cruises about the Solent. Now, of course, keeping her was out of the question. He must put his beloved up for sale and live upon the proceeds somehow until he had paid off the rapacious clerks of the Admiralty Office.

Hoare lost his heart to *Thunderer* at once. She lay snug at a small floating pier below the Hard, to which the more knowledgeable captains chose to direct their coxswains. Like a lass well aware of her beauty, she glowed. She was under thirty feet in length, a seven ton craft at the most. Either of the two tall officers could reach halfway to her miniature crosstrees. Forward of her mast lay a cuddly. Sadly yet proudly Hornblower unlocked it.

"Please," he said to Hoare with a flourish. He blew his nose.

The cuddy was icy but snug. Its overhead was just high enough for them to crouch upon lockers set on either side of a table whose base extended the full length of the cuddy.

"The enclosure of one of Mr. Gunter's patent sliding keels," Hornblower explained. "I installed it so I could explore shallow waters as well as work to windward moderately well."

Hoare nodded. "I see."

"Would you like to take her out?" Hornblower's eyes were all but pleading. He blew his nose.

"If it would not trouble you."

"Not at all," Hornblower said. "I have no duties to occupy my time."

His voice carried a trace of bitterness, Hoare thought, and not without reason. It was bad enough that their Lordships of the Admiralty had seen fit to throw their seamen on the beach to starve; that they would do the same for their trained, loyal officers passed all belief.

Between them the two had *Thunderer's* jib and loose-footed gaff mainsail set in minutes. They cast off smartly and let her run free through the light chop of the inner harbor. With the wind astern, the cold was less painful. Nevertheless, Hornblower chose to slip below and put on an oilcloth jacket. Above it his wet blue nose protruded.

"You'll notice she gripes a bit," he observed. "I prefer that to a lee helm."

"It's a matter of choice," Hoare said.

By now they were out of the ruck of little oared harbor craft and running into the Solent. Hornblower blew his nose. "It was kind of you, Mr. Hoare, not to remark on my cold and the sound I must make in clearing my nose," he said. "Another man might well have remarked on the appropriateness of the noise and my name."

Hoare gave his silent laugh, a sound that a bluestocking lady had once compared to the sound of one hand clapping. "Given the possibilities of unseemly plays on my own name and voice," he whispered over the breeze, "I would be mad to open that subject."

"Do you often take her out single-handed?" he asked after they had dropped the peculiar sliding keel and put her close-hauled on the larboard tack.

"Very seldom," Hornblower said. "As I found during my brief sojourn among the elect, solitude is the fate of every ship's master and commander. But even though *Thunderer* is quite small enough to handle alone, I like companionship. Like nuns and noblemen I do not go about alone."

Hoare was about to respond with some light remark but halted, hang-jawed.

"What. Did. You. Say?" he whispered. Perplexed, the other repeated his statement.

"Why—like nuns and noblemen I do not go about alone."

"My God," Hoare said. "Look here; d'ye know where *Eole* lies?"

"Just off Spit Head itself." Hornblower pointed aft, over *Thunderer's* quarter. "You can see her there, between *Hercules* and *Lively*."

"Will you do me the great favor of taking me out to her?"

"Of course, Mr. Hoare. Anything for a fellow officer," Hornblower said as he eased the main sheet. "But why? Be so kind as to house the sliding keel, sir," he added. He let *Thunderer* fall off, laid her course directly for *Eole*, and blew his nose. "The lanyard there, by the hatch."

When Hoare had obeyed, he felt the little yacht almost surge ahead. Sitting forward, his mouth to Hornblower's ear, he explained what had transpired these last days and what he expected to ask of the other officer. He also agreed to purchase the little vessel.

As Hoare had seen the minute *Thunderer* rounded the frigate's stern, the port admiral's barge already bobbed at her starboard entry port and a rear-admiral's pendant snapped at the main. Sir George Hardcastle, Rear-Admiral of the Blue, had boarded the frigate with his party. One of the barge's crew handily caught the line Hoare tossed him, and the pair swarmed aboard.

*Eole*, soon to be *Vendée*, had been a crack frigate when she exchanged broadsides with *Staghound*, but that had been nearly ten years ago. Today, laid up in ordinary, she was a slipshod nightmare. Her main yard was cockbilled, her standing rigging slack. To use the navy's expression, she looked as if she had been swinging at anchor long enough to ground on her own beef bones. When he uncovered to greet the new arrivals, the bypassed, threadbare lieutenant commanding her showed a scanty head of gray, shoulder-length hair. Hoare shuddered. There, he knew, stood tomorrow's Bartholomew Hoare.

A fleet of dignitaries and their attendants were standing about the quarterdeck, formed into two clumps. One was composed of unfamiliar Frenchmen, one of whom was ablaze with ribbons and stars. Heading the other party was his own admiral. To this group Hoare prepared to introduce his companion.

"Mr. Hornblower needs no introduction to *me*," Sir George said. "You have had uncommon ill luck, sir. I shall keep you in mind in the hope of finding an occasion to remedy it."

"Thanky, sir," Hornblower answered. Hoare thought that, though sincere, his voice conveyed little hope.

"Thank God you came aboard, Hoare," the admiral said. "You know the extent of my French—'Mercy bocoo.' 'Vooly-voo cooshy?' That's about it. Patterson here tries hard, but his tongue isn't as sharp as his pen. I need you to do the honors between us and the Fro . . . er, the French. The fancy one's the Duc d'Angoulême," he continued in a carrying quarterdeck whisper. "King Louie's brother."

That made him the half-brother of the murdered Provins. Now that

he had made the connection, Hoare saw that the duc bore a wide black band on his arm, half covering the bullion.

He made his deepest leg to the duc, bending one knee and sweeping his cocked hat well to one side in the approved manner. In doing so he sighted a familiar figure standing well to the front of the duc's attendants: the Comte de Montrichard. The two exchanged stiff nods.

"Sir," Hoare said to his admiral in his most urgent whisper, "a moment of your time if you would be so kind." He drew Sir George aside while the rest of the two parties waited, murmuring. At last Sir George nodded, looked about him, stepped to midships of the quarterdeck, withdrew a paper that fluttered in the wind.

"Order the hands to assemble," he said in a flat voice. He waited while an ancient boatswain twittered his lonely pipe. Hoare knew that with the pipe he himself carried for various communications beyond the power of his own feeble voice he could have out-tweeted the poor man any day. To either side of the waist the two crews drew up, the cluster of British seamen in their winter peajackets and a shivering gang of what must pass for Frenchmen. These were, if possible, even more of a mixed bag than the British, and they were clad in a grade of junk that would make the greediest purser in the navy sneer.

At Sir George's quiet order, one of his scanty marine guard stood to the flag halyard leading to *Vendée's* spanker boom. A French seaman crouched at his side bearing a bundle of white in his arms, the white and gold fleur-de-lys ensign of Bourbon France. At the moment when his admiral declared the transfer of ownership, the lobster would lower the faded Union Jack forever while the Frenchman ran up the Bourbon banner. At the foot of the mainmast stood a second Frog, ready to hoist a French commission pennant to the main truck.

"Off hats," said the old lieutenant, and the admiral began, his breath steaming in the chill wind as he read.

"By the Commissioners for executing the office of Lord High Admiral of Great Britain and Ireland, et cetera, and of all His Majesty's plantations, et cetera: By virtue of the power and authority to us given, we do hereby transfer ownership and control of His Majesty's ship *Eole* into the possession of his Majesty's great ally and brother monarch of France, His Most Christian Majesty Louis, the eighteenth of that name. And we do charge all officers and men to recognize her at all times upon her ways going and coming upon the seas, subject to the customs of the service.' Sound off."

Once again the feeble twitter; all hands on the quarterdeck stood to attention. Now blue with cold, the admiral doffed his own hat and bowed to the Duc of Angoulême. The Union Jack came down, struggling all the way, passing the rising flag of France as it went. At last the white and gold whipped in the icy wind from off England's shore.

Angoulême now began to read his acknowledgment. The legalistic

French passed Hoare's understanding and evidently that of all the other listeners as well, for the two ranks of men began to cough and shuffle. But the unintelligible recitation ended at last. The duc wound down. He turned to De Montrichard, motioning him to step forward.

"It is His Most Christian Majesty's will that command of his good ship *Vendée* be placed in the hands of the Comte de . . ."

Hoare could not expect his whisper to be heard over the duc's drone, and he feared that his boatswain's call would be misunderstood. He resorted to the ultimate. Putting two fingers into his mouth, he produced an ear-shattering whistle. The affronted Angoulême fell silent.

"*Un moment, messieurs,*" Hoare croaked. "I accuse Monsieur the Comte de Montrichard of having murdered his master and admiral, the Duc de Provins."

The Frenchmen on the quarterdeck fell into disarray. Upon seeing that their admiral retained his composure, the Englishmen naturally conformed.

De Montrichard was the first of his countrymen to recover his aplomb. "I demand to know the meaning of this effrontery. It is outrageous. The man is not only mute; he is mad."

Hoare filled his lungs. "I have never been to France," he began, "but I *have* spent time among French gentry when serving in Canada." Mindful of his dead bride and stolen daughter he lost breath, choked, gestured to Hornblower in silent appeal.

"Mr. Hoare knew," Hornblower said on his behalf, "that a prince of the blood might lie, cheat, and steal at will. He might lie with the wife of his equerry and his best friend; he might cheat at cards; he might steal the honor of a decent *maître d'armes*. But . . ."

Hoare raised his hand and resumed the story on his own.

"But there was one thing he would never do. He would never, *never* go into a public place like Portsmouth Common without an attendant. Failing any other, that attendant was Monsieur le Comte de Montrichard." He paused for breath. "Kindly empty your pockets, sir," Hoare rasped at the comte.

Hippolyte de Montrichard wasted no time. He spun on his heel like a dancing master, dived over *Vendée's* taffrail, and began swimming strongly out to sea. "Fire on that man!" Admiral Hardcastle bellowed. His marine guard sprang to obey. A family of fountains sprang to life around the fugitive, but he kept on, using a powerful overhand stroke. Then he paused in the middle of the fairway as if wondering where to go next, thrust his body half out of the water, and made a graceful surface dive. His toes, pointed skyward, were the last to be seen of him.

"Man overboard!" cried the superseded lieutenant.

"Case proved, I think," whispered Bartholomew Hoare.

" . . . Montrichard was desperate," Hoare gasped to his surrounding

audience. The last of his whisper was giving out. Again he turned to Hornblower. "Echo me, if you will."

"With his wife out of favor," Hornblower repeated for him, "Montrichard now had no hold over her lover, Provins. Now he could no longer expect him to sign the orders placing him in command of *Vendée*. He saw his opportunity for advancement to honor vanishing, and he could not bear it. "In that, of course, he utterly misread his master. De Barsac's anger at Provins was, in fact, due to the duc's explanation that, in all fairness to his equerry and confidant Montrichard, he could not deprive him of his standing as husband of a royal *maîtresse en titre* without some compensation. While wholly unofficial, the role had given Montrichard a certain cachet, and he had done nothing to warrant losing it. So Provins would grant the command of *Vendée* to Montrichard instead of De Barsac.

"But Montrichard could not credit Provins with being, like his ancestor Bayard, a *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*. He was desperate. He would become a nothing among nothings in a nothing French court. He could not face the shame of it. So he forged his master's signature on a blank commission form, sealed it with his master's seal, and presented the document at Admiralty House."

There was a general murmur among the Frenchmen on *Vendée's* quarterdeck. Hoare was certain that a tear gleamed on Angoulême's powdered cheek. "But you have no proof, monsieur," said Angoulême coldly.

Hoare's answering shrug was as expressive as any Frenchman's. "The comte, by his own action just now, would appear to have provided ample proof. Beyond that, perhaps even more will surface."

"Hmph," said Admiral Sir George Hardcastle. "Well, gentlemen, are we to transfer this ship to the Marine Royale, or not? If so, who is to command her?"

"Sir," Hoare whispered, and handed Sir George the document the Vicomtesse de Barsac had entrusted to him. Even though his port admiral read no French, he would recognize the person named in it.

"Hmph," said Sir George, and passed the document to Angoulême.

"Of course," said the duc; his English reached that far. "Let us go ashore, then," he added in his own language, "and inform the Vicomte de Barsac, in his lonely cell, of his good fortune."

Left on the deck of *Vendée*, Hoare and Hornblower looked at each other and shrugged.

"Will you light me ashore in your new command, sir?" Hornblower asked. His expression was that of the classic Spartan boy being gnawed by a fox.

"With pleasure, Mr. Hornblower," said Bartholomew Hoare.

"I do not understand this, Mr. 'Oare." The widowed Comtesse de



Montrichard had summoned Hoare to the Three Suns. Tasteful in mourning, she extended a document to Hoare. "I had thought that my husband had deposited this commission with your nice admiral."

"He did, madame. I saw it there myself."

"Why, then, do I find it in the possessions of Guillaume, which your mayor's honest minions returned to me so kindly with those of my late husband?"

Hoare inspected the document more closely. To the best of his more-than-adequate recollection, it had been prepared on the same printed form. Yes, here were the same typographical errors, made by a Portsmouth printer unfamiliar with the language he was setting. The handwritten entries named *Vendée* as the ship in question, De Montrichard as her master. The date was identical, as was the impression of the seal the mayor's men had found yesterday upon recovering the drowned nobleman's body. And the signature on this specimen was free, quite illegible, not the careful inscription Hoare remembered on the document Montrichard had deposited with Sir George's hands that the clerk Patterson had shown him.

Raising his head from the paper, Hoare looked into the huge, warm, violet eyes.

"This proves, madame, that as I believed, the duc had already given *Vendée* to his equerry when he was killed."

"Then my husband's crime was without purpose," she said.

"Precisely, madame," whispered Bartholomew Hoare.

# SWITCHEROO

C. K. Vermillion



**T**he first thing Pauline Corbin noticed when she got home was that her Waterford crystal bud vase was missing.

The second thing she noticed was a clock in the center of the white crocheted doily where the bud vase was supposed to have been.

"Now, don't that beat all," Pauline breathed in wonderment. She edged over to the coffee table

and hunched down for a closer look. The clock was an anniversary clock, one of those glass-domed affairs with numbers fancified to the point of obscurity and four gold pendulum legs with gold ball feet that twirled back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Well, the gold balls were twirling and the arrow hands pointed at numerals in Roman or Greek or maybe even King James, but the base that Pauline tapped

with her fingernail was plastic, not brass. A functional but cheap replica of the real thing, like the ones for sale at the Wal-Mart store where she worked.

"If that don't beat all," she repeated, still amazed at how a clock could ticktock its way into her condo and dispense with her bud vase all without her knowing. Pauline's eyes roved to see what else might have escaped or taken refuge, which was not a lengthy ordeal. There was hardly room to spit in the scrunched condo on Buchwald Street, which she'd bought with Harvey's life insurance money after he died.

Scanning, she determined that the walnut veneer entertainment center was as it should be, framed pictures of her overly extended family were still positioned just so, and—wait.

The Hummel she kept on the endtable by the couch had vanished. The Hummel was actually a mediocre look-alike of Goebel's famous strolling boy toting an umbrella, but authentic or not, the dang thing was nowhere in sight. What was in sight was a ghastly horse statue. A bronco, petrified in mid-buck, ridden by a fearless cowboy brandishing a ten-gallon hat with his free arm, all worked in brass. Pauline tapped again. Make that plastic.

"A mite peculiar robbery," she mused, feeling a little let down. Game show contestants who got consolation prizes of Dinty Moore Beef Stew by the case probably felt likewise.

Thinking about robbery sud-

denly reminded Pauline of jewels. She went to her bedroom where she kept the cedar box from Myrtle Beach with seashell patterns woodburned on the lid. The box felt heavy enough. She lifted the lid and rummaged through her jewels. Okay, they weren't really jewels; in fact, a few pieces still had their Wal-Mart clearance sale stickers. Rummaging accounted for everything except her Bulova watch, the one with the microscopic diamond in place of the twelve.

And there was a replacement. The new watch had a stretch-link band and a larger than normal face. Pauline wasn't sure if this constituted men's or women's styling, but the simplistic design of the face was curiously attractive. She slipped it over her left wrist. The watch was loose, although not quite to the point of falling off.

Pauline put the box aside, then sat on the edge of her bed to figure. She'd miss the Hummel, lots of people commented on that, but no one in her circle of friends appreciated the value of Waterford. As for the Bulova . . . Pauline fingered the new watch thoughtfully. In her first year as a widow the only thing she'd changed was her address, and that change hadn't amounted to much. Her new condo was in the same town, a place east of Cleveland where suburbs had oozed over rural towns, depositing a thick layer of strip malls and designer homes in cracks along the way. She wore her old clothes, used her old fur-

niture, saw her old friends, and carried on with her old habits just as she'd done for thirty years as Harv's wife.

Pauline studied the watch. It was quirky and made her feel a tad adventurous. Maybe it was time to carve a niche for herself beyond Pauline-the-widow.

Still, Pauline shifted uneasily. An uninvited guest with selectively sticky fingers had gotten in and walked around her bedroom. She should notify the police, but of what? Grand felonious switcheroo? On the other hand the authorities might already be searching for the clock and horse. Pauline didn't want to find herself reforming in a jail cell over a hat-waving cowboy statue she didn't even like.

She made a pot of coffee, set out a plate of Pepperidge Farm cookies, and dialed 911.

Police Sergeant Abdul Murphy got assigned to the call from an addlebrained middle-aged woman claiming that a reverse burglar had left a horse in her condo.

"Reverse burglar," he jeered, his dark eyes rolling. Lots of retired folks lived on Buchwald Street, so maybe this was a case of dementia. Murphy shoved a stick of gum in his mouth and put his gun in the drawer. Some days he needed tranquilizer darts more than bullets, but only veterinarians and zookeepers got those. Like wild animals were more unpredictable than crazy people.

Murphy cruised his police cruiser over to 11035 Buchwald Street

and knocked on the door. Pauline Corbin answered. She was exactly as he'd expected: short, shapeless, and dulled by time. About fifty years' worth was his guess. And he got the exact response he'd learned to expect: a momentary look of surprise. People never expected someone named Murphy to be Lebanese.

Pauline Corbin, however, recovered quicker than most and graciously ushered him inside. Murphy followed her into the living room. He neither saw nor smelled any trace of equestrian life, and a good thing, too, since standing space in this diminutive domicile was at a premium.

"You reported a horse?" Murphy began doubtfully, pulling a notepad and pen from his jacket.

"Over there." Pauline fiddled with the large watch around her left wrist and nodded at a table behind him. Murphy turned and saw a cheap statue of a bucking bronco. He cracked his gum impatiently. "What about it?"

"It's not mine."

Murphy stood with his pen poised, unsure of what to write.

"And the Hummel my husband Harvey bought for my birthday is missing."

"Someone broke in here to leave this horse and steal your Hummel?"

"And my Waterford vase. They left that horrible clock in its place. They took my diamond Bulova, too."

"What'd you get for the watch?" Murphy asked. A sarcastic edge had crept into his voice.

Pauline hung her head and twisted the loose watchband. "Nothing."

The dense clouding of Murphy's Mediterranean features cast shadows over his blank notepaper. For reasons he could not quite specify, her answer was unsatisfactory, but at least it explained why the timepiece sagging from her arm was such a clunker.

Pauline showed Murphy to the three separate crime scenes, then left him to poke around on his own. He brought the clock and horse statue to the table in the kitchen when additional invaluable clues failed to surface.

Pauline offered refreshments. Murphy declined, knowing from experience that the cookies were likely to be stale and the coffee too weak. He sat at the table and took detailed descriptions of the missing vase, Hummel, and Bulova. "Here's what we'll do," he concluded. "I'll take the horse and clock to the station. We've had three other calls from this area tonight, so the rightful owners might turn up. Who knows? Maybe your things ended up at someone else's house."

Pauline looked down at her hands a bit guiltily. "Mostly I want to see that the criminal is brought to justice."

"Yeah, well, we all do," Murphy mumbled. He chomped his gum to mask an acute eruption of terminal irritation. This country was full of Pauline Corbins, everyday middle-aged working-class people getting their dander

up over a petty pile of worthless junk, and the average U.S. citizen was just naive enough to take the term "public servant" literally.

Murphy made a curt police exit and went out to his cruiser. He placed the statue and clock on the front seat, fastening the safety belt around them as a precaution against sudden stops. "She's gonna expect me to handle this like a matter of international espionage," he muttered to himself. He turned the key and the engine sparked to life. "Probably should at least have fingerprinted the stuff."

Pauline repackaged the Pepperidge Farm cookies, poured the leftover coffee down the drain, brushed her teeth, and slipped a nightshirt over her head. In bed she felt unusually cosy and warm, not violated. Everyone in the romance novels she read underwent severe personal violation after a robbery. Pauline fingered the watchband on her wrist before going to sleep. Maybe she wasn't going into violation stages because she'd gotten something out of her robbery.

According to the morning paper, a total of four houses in the Buchwald Street area had been burglarized the previous night. Sergeant A. Murphy, Pauline read over a bowl of cereal, was in charge of the investigation. She pressed the watch gently to her arm. He'd been here last night and had seen her wearing it. Hopefully, he wouldn't investigate too far.

Pauline was scheduled to work

opening shift. She clocked in with ten minutes to spare and headed for her post in small appliances. A mountain of double knit rolled out from the jewelry counter as she passed.

"Thank God you're all right!" Marjorie's chins flapped as she threw her arms around Pauline. "A number of valuable items taken, that's what the paper said. Oh, Pauline, please tell me they didn't get your Hummel!"

Pauline wallowed in flab to keep the watch from falling off. Marjorie took note. "Not your diamond Bulova, too! And that one," she clucked, "must be Harv's. Mercy, he's still taking care of you from beyond the grave."

Pauline strained to release the suction of Marjorie's arms. Her overbearing concern was usually soothing, but today a claustrophobic restlessness stirred subgut. Marjorie felt Pauline stiffen. "Oh, you'll be tense for awhile," she cooed, "but don't you worry. I'll special order a new Bulova soon as I open up the register."

Pauline hesitated. "I'm not sure I want another."

"Don't be ridiculous! And another thing." Marjorie was shaking her index finger at Pauline, an action that sent seismic waves of flesh surging up to her shoulder. "You need to get a dog. Nobody's safe these days, especially with Harv gone. Don't have to be Rottweiler mean, just so it barks real loud. Promise me you'll get a dog. Today. After work."

Pauline didn't want a dog that she'd have to clean up after and

be home to let out. "I'll get a dog," she said anyway.

Marjorie squealed with glee. "Now, you call me when you get that dog because I know all about canine obedience."

Pauline left Marjorie alone to housebreak a rack of marked-down earrings. The loose watchband clacked against the metal clasp on her purse. Having a dog probably wasn't a bad idea, but Marjorie had thought of it and Pauline was suddenly tired of Marjorie's bossiness.

Lingerie was just beyond jewelry. June popped out from the land of brassieres when she saw Pauline. "I'm so sorry. How can I help?" June was as narrow as Marjorie was wide. Her stick arms waved helplessly.

"Gee, there's really nothing I need . . ."

June grabbed Pauline by the shoulders pulling her nose-to-nose close. "That A-rab, Sergeant Ab-dool, didn't come to your house, did he?" she demanded. "Isn't right, with you being a widow and no man around!"

Pauline wrestled free and pushed the watch up over her wrist. June never trusted foreigners with shifty dark eyes and uncommon accents. Pauline never trusted them either because Harv hadn't, but right now on her own, she couldn't think of a sensible reason for distrust.

"Actually," she replied smugly, "he was very professional."

June's eyes narrowed. "You never talked like that when Harvey was alive. It's the shock and



violation of the burglary, I bet. You're doing things without thinking, like wearing that awful watch."

Pauline turned to leave, but June caught her by the arm. "Take my advice. Get yourself some timers."

Pauline glanced at the watch, confused.

"I mean light timers, little electrical thingies, look kinda like adapters. You hook 'em into your living room lights so the lamps come on at dusk. They fool burglars into thinking you're home when you're not. Promise me you'll get timers."

Pauline didn't want timers or any other electrified doodads that postdated her high school science. "I'll get timers," she said anyway, then slipped behind a rack of underwear before June conjured up more unhelpful advice.

Pauline found Warren from hardware hovering over a display of Crockpots in small appliances, waiting. Semiretired, Warren was just beginning to crinkle. He held out a sizable box for Pauline's inspection. "Home security system," he announced.

Pauline was overwhelmed. She shook her head vigorously.

"C'mon Pauline, Harv and me went way back. He'd want you to let me help. This here alarm is guaranteed to run off your scariest burglar. Door locks, they can be jimmied, but this here security alarm can't be turned off by anyone but you."

"But—"

"Today's my half day. I'll get to

your place about noon, have the whole shebang operational by the time you get home. Just don't you worry." Warren aimed himself back at hardware. "Don't you worry none."

Pauline was tied up with a manufacturer's toaster-oven recall the rest of the day. At the end of her shift she bought two light timers from Warren's afternoon replacement, then picked up dog food and a leash before leaving the store.

Her next stop was the pound. She inspected two rows of pedigreed pooches and, in the end, settled for a medium-sized short-haired mutt that barked relentlessly. "I'll call you Thunder," she said as he wriggled in her arms, "because you bark up a storm."

At home Pauline pushed the green button to activate the security system as Warren had instructed, set the light timers, and settled Thunder on a blanket by the patio door in the kitchen. Once he was chewing contentedly on a jerky stick, she headed for the bathroom. She emerged half an hour later with her hair wrapped in a towel. She walked to the kitchen to prepare dinner but stopped dead in her tracks beside the refrigerator.

Two strangers, a man and a woman, were standing in her kitchen by the patio door. Thunder lay placidly at their feet slobbering over dog biscuit crumbs.

"Don't mean to startle you, Pauline," the man said. "Gave your dog a biscuit so's his barking wouldn't scare you." The man,

elderly but not ancient, wore baggy jeans and a faded flannel shirt. White stubble coated the sags of his face. The woman looked older. She had on slipover sweat-clothes and tennis shoes with Velcro fasteners. Her eyes darted suspiciously as she hissed, "Ruskies! Ruskies!"

"I'm Stan, and this is my sister Estelle." Stan nudged the woman with his elbow. "Quit spittin', Estelle, and be nice." The woman stopped hissing and nodded.

"Estelle's not all there, Alzheimer's, you know," Stan expounded. Estelle set out to crack him with her hand, but Stan got to her arm first and pulled it gently to his side. "I take care of her since my missus and her mister passed. I hate to barge in like this, but we're in a bind."

By now Pauline was pretty sure that Stan and Estelle were unarmed and harmless, and the hostess in her prevailed. She offered cookies and coffee.

Stan nodded, and Estelle began hissing again. "That's a yes," Stan translated. Pauline made coffee and recycled the Pepperidge Farm cookies. Estelle sat beside Stan at the table.

"You see, our place was robbed last night. We don't have much, but they got the anniversary clock that Estelle's mister—don't say his name out loud because it riles her—he got her for their silver wedding anniversary. Estelle winds it every night before bed, part of her routine. She don't sleep without it, which means I don't sleep neither. I know it's a

longshot, but I thought since you was robbed, too, you might have some idea where her clock might have got to."

"As a matter of fact, I do. It was on the doily on my coffee table where my Waterford vase was supposed to have been. Sergeant Murphy took it to the police station when he came to investigate. I imagine all you'd have to do is go to the station and claim it."

Mightily relieved, Stan reached for a cookie. Estelle slapped his hand. "Russsskie poissson!"

"You stop that, Estelle!" Stan bellowed. "Ain't no more Russia, Berlin Wall's come apart, and the Communist party's all dead."

Estelle stared down at the table drooling in silence. Pauline set the plate by the sink, and Estelle relaxed.

"Her mind's stuck back about 1960. She thinks Khrushchev is mayor of Cleveland and everything's a Russian plot. Best thing is to I-G-N-O-R-E H-E-R," Stan spelled with effort as he gathered up Estelle. Pauline showed them out the patio door, then glared at Thunder.

"A lot of good you were."

Marjorie was sure to have boned up overnight on creative solutions to dog problems, so Pauline stretched out the toaster-oven recall as long as possible the next day. When she got home from work, she again pushed the green button on the security system, then lay down in the bedroom for a nap.

An hour later she ambled from

the bedroom, her hair a tangle of snarls. She stopped abruptly in the living room when she saw a man standing inside the front door. Thunder was asleep on his rug in the back. This man was younger than Stan, and bulky, with thick black hair, overgrown eyebrows, and Western-style vest and boots.

"Didn't mean to surprise you, Pauline, but your doorbell seems to be out of order. Your car was in the drive, so I knew you were home." Pauline glanced at the security box. The green ON light still glowed. The big man extended his hand. "The name is Owens. I live over thataway, street behind you."

Sensing that Owens was about as dangerous as Stan and Estelle, Pauline led him to the kitchen where she again set out the Pepperidge Farm cookies and made coffee.

"Reason I'm here," Owens said slurping noisily, "is that my place got broken into day before yesterday."

"Four houses in all," Pauline added reaching for a teaspoon and creamer.

"Stan and Estelle said their clock turned up here. Don't know whether to believe it on account of Estelle. She's out of her head, thinks I'm some kind of a modern-day Russian spy."

Pauline pushed the cookie plate toward Owens. "Now, that's real neighborly, Pauline, but those got nuts. Can't have nuts on account of my diverticulitis. Anyway, this burglar made off with

my favorite Western memento of a bucking bronco. It was a present to myself back in '68 when I went west to Oklahoma with my brother."

"Sergeant Murphy has it at the police station."

Owens grinned gratefully. "I'm much obliged to you, Pauline. By the way, I do electrician work. Wouldn't mind a bit taking a look at your doorbell."

Owens lumbered off to the living room while Pauline dumped the extra coffee and stored the Pepperidge Farm cookies. He reappeared in no time. "Found your problem," he announced escorting Pauline into the living room. He pointed to a tangle of wires inside the doorbell box.

"See here, you have to disconnect the doorbell to install this type of system. These hanging wires here, whoever installed your alarm forgot to reconnect them to the doorbell." Owens reattached the wires, tightened a screw, and patted Thunder.

"Nice dog," he said, then left.

Pauline scowled more fiercely than ever at Thunder and thanked Warren and the rest of the Wal-Mart hardware gang in no uncertain terms.

Sergeant Abdul Murphy always considered himself one tough soldier. He had endured taunts as a child because he was the son of an immigrant mother, and he'd lived through fifteen years of hardcore police duty in the drug- and gang-besotted neighborhoods of East Cleveland. The transfer

farther east to the sprawling fringe suburbs of Lake County was a reward for all his self-sacrificing effort.

Now Murphy's reward was about to kill him. There was no joy in keeping the peace when the only things disturbing it were people passing bad checks, fences built without permits, and a few bizarre incidents. And Murphy had apparently been promoted to special duty officer in charge of the bizarre. Two days ago there'd been the reverse burglar/horse in the condo call. Last night brought the old man crusading for his long-lost anniversary clock and his demented sister spitting about Russian invasions and Communist plots.

Murphy leaned his chair back against the wall and sighed. Tonight's featured guest had just exited stage left, a Conway Twitty look-alike hankering after his renegade bucking bronco. Murphy watched as other officers buzzed around the squad room handling normal police work like traffic violations and domestic disputes. Perhaps, he thought, it was time to consider a less stressful line of work.

He extracted a requisition form from his top drawer and began logging an official request for a transfer back to the inner city.

The next day after work Pauline stopped at the grocery to buy milk and bread but not Pepperidge Farm cookies. The front door latch clicked as she was placing the carton of milk in the refriger-

ator. She adjusted the loose watch, checking the time, six thirty. The living room lights should have come on by now.

She peered cautiously around the corner. The living room was steeped in shadows, with one shadow in particular lurking by the front door. Thunder, of course, was asleep in the back.

"Didn't mean to alarm you, Miz Pauline. The door was unlocked, so I came on in. I'm Guy Branson, live a couple of blocks down. My mom noticed you'd put your lights on timers. She sent me to check on you because they weren't on when she drove by."

Pauline switched on a lamp manually. Guy was youthful and lanky, his hair tied in a ponytail reaching halfway down the back of his denim jacket. Like Owens and Stan and Estelle, he wasn't fearsome, so Pauline geared up for another round.

"Cookies and coffee?"

Guy shook his head. "'Preciate it, but I just had dinner. There is one thing I need to ask you about, though."

Pauline felt a sudden flush and fumbled with the watch at her wrist. Not a big man's watch, she realized, but compact, just the right size for a young man of about twenty. "What's that?" she asked. Her voice was hoarse.

"Would you mind if I looked at your light timers? Maybe I could fix them."

"That's it?"

"Yep."

"Oh." Pauline cleared her throat. "I guess that'd be okay."

Guy talked as he pulled the couch away from the wall. "You see, that wacko lady, Crazy Estelle, convinced my mom that there are Russian spies living among us. You'd think there was a new generation of underground Russians trying to link up with North Korea and raise a Second Communist Empire."

Guy disappeared into the crevice between the couch and wall. "My mom's having panic attacks, two and sometimes three a day. She'll be on Prozac if Estelle doesn't let up. Aha!" Thunder's jerky strip thudded up over the couch.

"Your dog's been playing back here, pulled these timers clean out of the sockets." Guy reset the timers and plugged them back in. "See you around, Miz Pauline, and don't take any wooden Ruskie nickels!" He winked and left Pauline by the door with fire darts shooting from her eyes at Thunder and curses flying out of her mouth at June.

Sergeant Abdul Murphy sat at his desk sipping his first cup of morning coffee. The brown grocery bag in front of him held one poorly painted imitation strolling-boy-toting-an-umbrella Hummel, a chipped Waterford crystal bud vase, and a nonworking diamond chip Bulova watch. Beside the bag lay the arrest report from last night.

Simon Grubbs, age fifty-eight. A recently laid-off machinist, now novice burglar. Went house to house with his loot in a bag leaving items he couldn't carry

when he found something that looked better, a "let's make a deal" form of thievery.

Murphy called to inform Pauline Corbin that her possessions had been recovered and were available for pickup. Pauline declined, claiming that the stuff was basically worthless and that she was sorry to have wasted his time on so trivial a pursuit.

Pauline's response caught Murphy off guard. In his experience the fancy fringe suburbs were populated by a species long on self-indulgence and short on considerate apologies. He rumpled his dark hair with his fingers, mystified, then wadded the job transfer form into a tight ball and aimed at the wastebasket.

Pauline placed her cereal bowl in the dishwasher after hanging up with Sergeant Murphy. She hadn't intended to divest herself of all three belongings at once, but repossessing them would have forced life back to normal. Which was, for Pauline, a Harvey-like life: same people to see, same places to go, same conversational topics—Harvey, or her lack of. Not that she didn't cherish him or the life they'd made together, but without him, her existence was as chipped as the vase, as imitation as the Hummel, and as worn out as the Bulova, which at one time had dazzled her senseless.

She'd spent a whole year marking time. Now she felt a restless urge to find something distinctively Pauline. Some of the past would have to let go to make room.

Of course, there was the matter of the watch. Pauline thought about that, too. The watch had no genuinely attractive features. Plus she always worried about it falling off, a huge inconvenience. And technically it was stolen.

She had an hour to spare. If she hustled, she could whiz through Wal-Mart before work and buy herself a nice Timex. Grabbing her purse, Pauline locked up the condo, got into her car, and drove away. Brimming with distractions, she never noticed as the watch slipped from her wrist and fell into the grass beside the driveway.

Two hours later a man emerged from his residence at 11038 Buchwald Street, directly across from the home of Pauline Corbin. A tall, raven-haired man with gallant gray eyes, he walked briskly, leading his black Labrador up and down the block.

The dog's eye caught the glint of gold first. The man followed his dog up Pauline's driveway and bent over for a closer look.

He chuckled to himself and slipped the watch into his pocket. Then, giving the dog's leash a sharp yank, he made an abrupt detour back to his condo.

The man went at once to his makeshift workbench. After seating himself and adjusting the light, he selected a pair of watchmaker's tweezers from among his tools. Resting the watch in the

palm of one hand, he removed the backing to reveal the watch's inner workings, then prodded carefully to loosen a tiny plastic disc.

A microdot. Nowadays governments were obsessed with electronic media. Everyone seemed to have forgotten the damage microfilm could do. He removed the dot and inspected it under magnification. The writing was Russian, too small to be read, but reading was not his objective. His job was to assure that no tampering with the dot had occurred, and Leonid Ivikovich was exceptional in his field.

Satisfied, he replaced the microdot and reassembled the watch. A padded mailing envelope lay on the table beside his tools. Ivikovich reached inside and removed a plain gold watch sent to him for repair. Pauline's watch went into the envelope, a substitute. The jewelry store owner would never spot the difference, but the switch would not be lost on Boris, the assistant store manager and Ivikovich's covert contact in the counterrevolutionary movement.

Ivikovich sealed the envelope and peeled the backing off a stick-on mailing label pre-addressed to the jewelry store in Vladivostok, Russia, near the North Korean border.

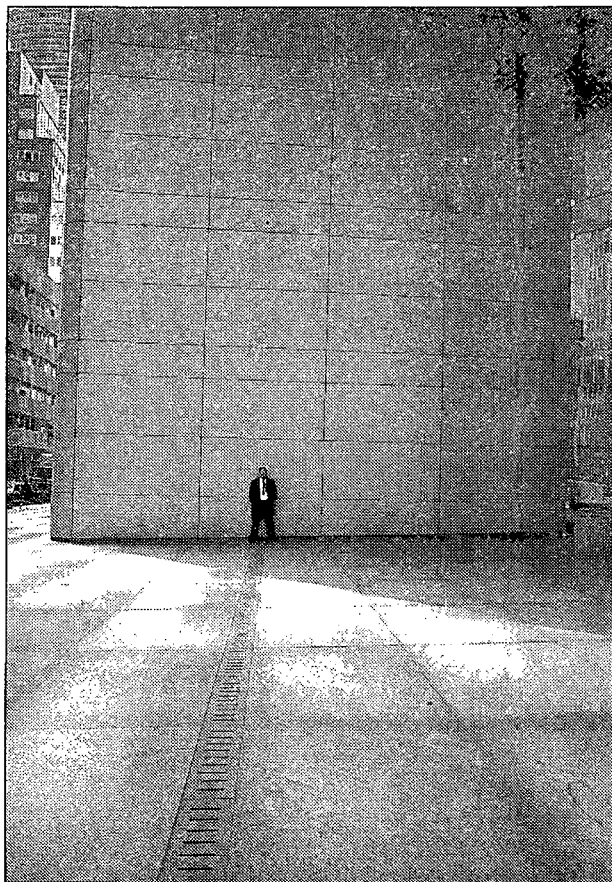
"НЕОЖИДАННАЯ МЕТАМОРФОЗА!" he exclaimed.\*

Switcheroo.

\*"Unexpected metamorphosis."



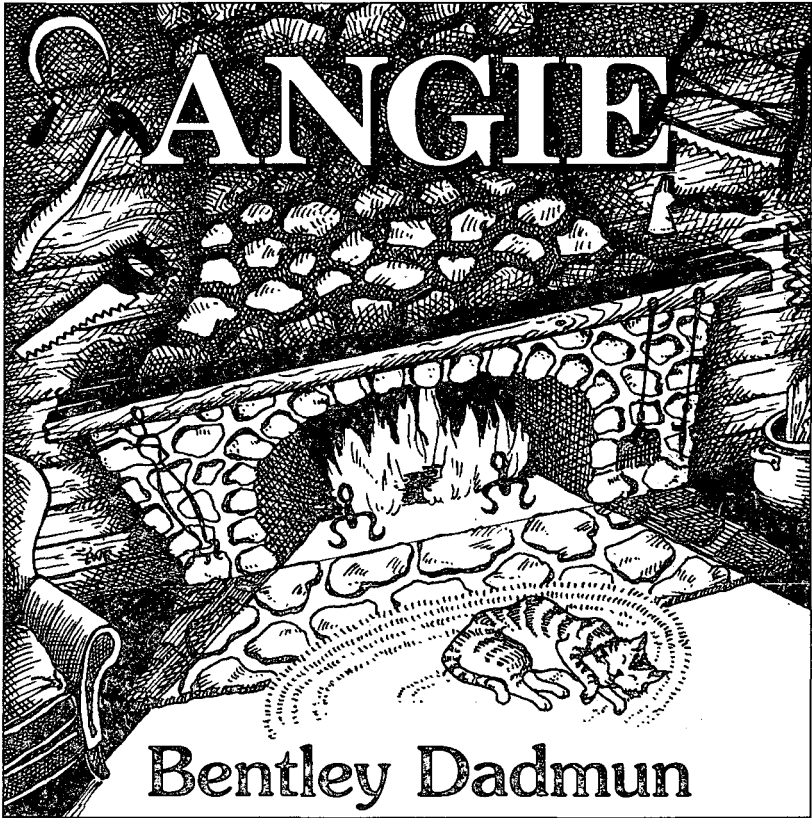
# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.*

A setup or what? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020. Please label your entry "February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.



## Angie

### Bentley Dadmun

I was out of catfood. And except for a jar of chunky applesauce, two Oatmeal Raisin PowerBars, and a moldy onion bagel, I was out of human food. If I were so foolhardy as to put applesauce or a PowerBar in Cat's hallowed dish, I'd get a look that'd fry rocks and very little sleep tonight. Cat, in her quiet, dignified way, is an expert at intimidation.

Home is a thirty-six foot mahogany sloop cradled in the middle of a grove of hardwood in the

middle of a pasture. The pasture is in the middle of a farm seven miles from town, and my transportation is a bicycle, so running down to the local Ma and Pa for a can of catfood and a pizza was not an option.

I looked at Cat, who was sitting expectantly by her dish, and decided on the only rational course of action. I put on my raincoat, foraged around until I found my umbrella, arranged Cat's sling on my chest, and reached up to open the hatch.

Cat, with that awkward stiff-legged gait of hers, hotfooted it past me and put a paw on my leg. We looked at each other, and I let out a sigh to let her know what a pain she was, knelt and helped her into the sling, and waited until she was comfortable.

The snow had melted, and the ground had thawed about three weeks early thanks to the infamous El Niño and global warming. Rain was forecast for the next five days, which would turn the grove and pasture into a quagmire and jack my irritation level to a record high. So, muttering about the unfairness of things and wondering why the fates were picking on me and only me, I pushed through the grove and across the rain-lashed pasture to the barn.

The Farm is home to about seventy senior citizens, fifty of whom live in the barn. The rest reside in a motley collection of R.V.'s and trailers scattered about the pastures and barnyard. There are even a few cows, but they were kicked out of the barn long ago and now live in a converted toolshed.

Most of the residents arrived at their golden years broke. By one process or another they ended up at The Farm, turning over their Social Security checks to Annie, owner and mayor of our little community, and getting room and board and companionship in return.

The front half of the second floor of the barn is a multipurpose room that everyone refers to as The Hall. Usually I avoid it, as eating

with crowds strums my nerves, but on this bitter night, driven by necessity, I molded my face into a pleasant facade and climbed the stairs.

We arrived just as the serving line opened up. I went to the end of the line and with the others did a slow shuffle past platters and bowls of thawed-out vegetables and cheap meat.

At sixty-three I am probably the youngest resident, and all the gray tired faces surrounding me are a window to my future where, despite exercise, attention to diet, and desperate wishing, I too shall end up. Which is another reason I avoid the place. It depresses me to be reminded of what's coming.

Clutching my plate, my smile blinking on and off like an erratic light, I weaved through the maze of diners and sat down at a wobbly card table in a dim corner of the dining area. I put Cat on the table and started to eat. Cat immediately jumped-fell to the floor and hobbled off to beg bits of meat from cooing old women.

Toward the back of The Hall are several islands of living room furniture, relics from better times, better places. Belly full, I sank into a tattered armchair the color of mud and stared at the fire roaring in the huge stone fireplace. Around me residents settled down with newspapers, magazines, and gossip, much of the latter induced by water glasses full of cheap wine.

I had begged two cans of cat-food from Thelma Madison, our

hard-driving cook, and a liter of wine from Mildred Beede, a pragmatic friend who can usually be counted on for a bottle and a harsh word, and had only to brave the walk back across the pasture to find contentment.

But the storm raged, making the barn tremble and sending erratic gusts of chilled air flitting around the hall. Cat was sprawled on the thick rug before the fire, warming scar tissue, so I slumped deeper in the chair, yawned, and laid my head back against the soft cushion.

And stared.

On either side of the fireplace, hanging from hand-forged iron hooks, was a collection of antique tools. They'd been there for years, silently obvious, the kind of thing I look at but never see. For something to do, and to waste a bit of time, I heaved myself out of the chair, walked over to it, and gazed at the saws, hammers, sickles, and things I wasn't sure of.

One by one I lifted tools off the wall, held them, and tried to form images in my mind. The users, the craftsmen who depended on these things, probably had a high regard for them, much as the long-haul trucker loves his truck. But as a lifelong klutz and academician, I could feel no empathy with the antique devices.

I put back a badly bent draw knife that must have been a hundred years old and lifted down a thick, awkward looking hatchet. It was a heavy thing with a wide, tarnished blade and a longish pine handle stained deep brown.

Down the length of the handle were carved images of animals, perhaps cows or horses, and buildings, perhaps barns or sheds. The would-be artist should have practiced a bit, for the carvings were crude and little more than raised, grooved lumps on the thick handle. I raised my hand to put it back on the wall.

And cut my thumb.

I looked at my bleeding thumb, then examined the handle. Something was embedded in it a few inches below the head. I took the hatchet back to the chair, dug glasses out of my pocket, and put the thing under the light.

Something grayish, a tiny point barely sticking out of the wood. A stone perhaps? Intrigued, I took out my penknife and picked away at the wood around the object, stopping every so often to blot my bloody thumb on my sweatpants. Ten minutes of work and the thing lay in the palm of my hand.

Bone. About two inches long, an inch wide, and maybe a quarter inch thick. I looked at the piece of bone in my hand, then picked up that old hatchet, held it by the handle, and cut an arc through the air.

"Harry, I believe Don Quixote used some sort of lance. But your philosophies are quite similar, so feel free to chase your windmills with a hatchet."

I closed my hand over the piece of bone, looked up at Mildred, and smiled. As I said, Mildred and I are friends of a sort—we treat each other with benign disrespect and pretend our respective lives

are actually going quite well. I put the hatchet back and said, "I was curious about the handle; someone spent a lot of time carving it."

"And they did a right poor job. Should've used that piece for kindling and tried again."

I nodded. "Any idea who it was? Or do people just donate to the wall if they think they have a treasure worth looking at?"

"I think those things have been up there as long as the room. Although I'm not positive—to me they're just a bunch of rusty pieces of iron. Seems to me I saw Victoria Drexel and that fool from Florida put them up a couple of days after The Hall was finished."

Cat, her fur and scars apparently warmed enough, put a paw on my leg. I lifted her up, and she stuck her head into the sling, wormed in, and squirmed around. "What fool from Florida?" I asked.

"You know, Harry, I've seen a lot of cats, but that one has to be the poorest sample of the species I've encountered. Maybe you should've left it on the road to get hit again. Probably done it a favor. I'm talking about that Luke Bouchard fellow, died two years ago. He was out feeding the cows, had a heart attack, and fell in the watering trough. Damn fool."

Mildred and Luke had had a mild romance going at the time, so I just raised my eyebrows, pointed at the hatchet, and said, "Was he the artist?"

"Heavens, no! That man didn't have a creative bone in his body. Seems to me I saw those things lying in a pile down in the stor-

age room. If I had to guess, I'd say Victoria thought of hanging them on the wall—it'd be her idea of rustic. It's my idea of nothing, putting pieces of rusted junk on a wall. I have to go. Don't forget, you promised to drive me to church in Concord come Easter. I've arranged to borrow Isabelle Monroe's Toyota for the trip."

"That's a couple of weeks away. Don't fret, I won't let you down."

"Hmph. You and Don Quixote, you'll find a windmill to chase and I'll be walking to Concord in the driving rain."

With Cat, her head and a paw hanging out of the sling, I walked down the stairs and into the night. Cat quickly tucked head and paw under cover and curled into a ball that bounced against my chest as I quick-marched across the uneven, muddy ground.

Victoria Drexel shares a sway-backed forty foot trailer with Alice Kaslow, a plump, pink-haired matron of seventy-five or so. Alice always has a smile on her face. Why? I'm not sure. Perhaps dementia, perhaps philosophy, perhaps two liters of white wine every day.

I banged the metal door with a fist, bent my back to the driving rain, and waited. Alice opened the door and squinted into the dark. "It's Harry Neal, Alice, may I come in?"

Her smile brightened. "Why, hell yes, do come in, Mr. Harry Neal. Stormy night and you're prowling about, can't be up to any good and it's probably exciting."



I entered a small, dark, paneled living room awash with dozens of photographs of orchids, prize ribbons, and small, tarnished trophies. Victoria and Alice are fanatical orchid growers, and when they weren't growing the things they wanted to talk about them. To forestall them I said, "I can't stay, just dropped by to see if Victoria was still up. I'd like to ask her a question."

Alice grinned and yelled, "Victoria, Harry Neal is here to ask you to the prom. What the hell you got wiggling around on your chest?" she asked me.

I opened my jacket. Cat stuck her head out, gazed at Alice, then started licking her paw. Alice smiled. "That poor thing. You're a good person to look after her, Harry." She darted in, gave me a peck on the cheek, and trotted down the narrow hall. "Victoria, get off the can and come see Harry."

Victoria Drexel is a large, chunky woman on the other side of seventy. She takes a dim view of most human endeavors and generally ignores what the rest of the planet is doing. She sauntered into the living room clad in a bright red terrycloth robe with some kind of plastic cap over her hair. "Good evening, Harry, come a-courting? On a night like this? Such gallant behavior! Why, I just might part with my favors." She laughed and flopped down on a short battered couch. "Alice says you want to ask me something."

"It's about those tools hanging next to the fireplace in The Hall. I know they've been there for

years, but for the first time I noticed, *really* noticed, them, and I was wondering where they came from. I didn't think any of us were collectors or had a thing for antique tools."

"You're right. They were rusting away in the barn, down in the storage area. When The Hall was finished, I thought they'd look nice hanging on the wall, kind of fit in with the motif. So Luke Bouchard and I scraped off some of the rust and grime and hung them up. I thought they looked kind of nice. Rustic."

"You don't have any idea who they belonged to?"

She pulled the plastic cap off her head, exposing a rat's nest of thin, bluish hair, ran a hand through it, shook her head like a wet cat, and said, "Actually, I think most of them belonged to Everett Sooter, that skinny little guy who lived in the busted-up Winnebago by the cow shed. He had a stroke about three years ago, and they took him off someplace. Probably dead now." She gave me an appraising look. "What's your reason for asking?"

"No special reason. As I said, I really noticed them for the first time this evening, and I wondered where they came from."

Victoria heaved herself upright. "Harry, I've known you for quite a few years now. You're conning me. You're nibbling at something and trying to get a bite on it."

Head bent, my arms wrapped around Cat's sling, I marched through the rain back to the boat.



I fed the woodstove, leaving the door open so I could watch the flames dance, put a glob of cat-food into Cat's dish, and gave her fresh water. She hunkered down, flipped a chunk out of the dish, slapped it with a paw, and ate it.

I took an appreciative sip of Mildred's wine and set the glass down on the table by the piece of bone. Before I closed up for the night, I wrapped it in tissue and put it in a plastic bag.

As soon as I doused the lights, Cat climbed to her perch by the window and gazed out at the night. In a few hours she would be by my bed, meowing softly to wake me, and I would pluck her from the floor and put her at the foot of the bed, and she would slowly come to the pillow and purr in my ear for a bit, then fuss and wash and finally settle down, her small battered head on my pillow.

During the winter I kept my bike in the barn. It's a gray and black mountain bike with a yellow and red trailer hooked to it. To leave Cat in the boat while I went to town was not in the cards. The few times I tried leaving without her, her cries of anguish resonated through the grove, and the resident crows sat in the maples and cawed their distaste at my insensitivity. Thus, Cat went along. I put her in the trailer, where she pawed the blanket until it was just right and gave me her "Okay, let's go" look.

The ride to town is seven miles of bad road, cold feet, sweating

back, and beautiful silence as the countryside unfolds at a sedate ten or twelve miles per hour. Instead of heading to Gretchen's as I usually did, I did something I haven't done in years: I pedaled to the sacred portals of the college's Lambron Science Building.

The biology department's secretary, a young, round piece of work with a gold lip ring and orange streaks in her hair, told me Dr. Raffa was in Room 510 preparing for a lab. When I was a practicing professor, Forrest Raffa and I used to go to Gretchen's once a week for onion soup and beer. He is a small, intense man with maybe sixty hairs on his head that he keeps rearranging in intricate patterns. He is complex, dedicated, and knowledgeable.

When I entered the lab, he was writing stuff on the room-length blackboard and whistling some tuneless ditty. I moved a burner out of the way, eased my butt onto a lab table, and waited. Cat, apparently captivated by the strange odors, slithered out of the sling and crawled along the table on her belly, sniffing at wet containers full of formaldehyde and pickled flesh.

Abruptly Forrest turned, stared at Cat and at me, then tossed the chalk in the air and cried, "Jesus Christ! Harry Neal, the runaway historian!"

We shook hands. "How long has it been, Harry? I don't dare say. Just because you went eccentric means you avoid your old drinking buddies?"

I smiled. "Last fall I was down

on the common enjoying a bottle of wine with a couple of friends. You saw me; I believe I then detected an increase in your stride."

His smile disappeared, and he stepped back. Finally he mumbled, "Yes, yes, you're quite right. I just couldn't bring myself to sit on the ground and drink wine and be seen with you and those rather crusty old men . . . I'm sorry, Harry."

I touched his shoulder. "It's not a problem. And I'm just as guilty—the reason I'm here is mercenary." I took the piece of bone out of my pocket and handed it to him. "I'd like to know what you think of this."

He fumbled glasses out of his lab coat and peered at it, turning it over and over in his hand as if it were a precious jewel. Finally he said, "Where did you get this?"

"In the woods, near an old cellar hole. I think it was a home-  
stead or a farm."

He raised his eyebrows. "Hmm. Hard to tell the age. What you have here is a piece of human skull, probably female, probably smallish, say under five six. Back in those days people buried their kin close by, oftentimes shallow." He stared at me. "Perhaps you lifted this off the top of an old grave."

"How do you know it was a small female?" I asked.

He glanced at the other end of the table where Cat was investigating a large jar with some sort of animal in it. "That is one sad looking cat. You always were a champion of the hurt and lame of

this world." He smiled. "How do I know?" Strutting over to a large wooden door, he flung it open, revealing shelf after shelf of bones and pieces of bones. Three of the shelves were filled with skulls, some of them shattered. He gave me a thin smile. "Remember, I sometimes do forensic work for the local police departments. With practice, logic, and experience one can deduce amazing things from a small piece of bone."

He held up the piece I had given him, then tossed it. I caught it and slipped it back in my pocket. He gave me another thoughtful look. "I doubt very much if your sample came from an old home-  
stead or farm graveyard. Furthermore, there's evidence of trauma, but that's not my concern. Now, I have a class in five minutes, what say we get together at Gretchen's sometime in the near future? You could tell me what you're up to and where that item really came from."

Gretchen's is a gentle little restaurant at the wrong end of a dim alley off Main Street. She caters to senior citizens with small pensions or trying to survive on Social Security. Like herself, the restaurant is warm and crusty, and I doubt it's changed since her mother opened it some forty years ago.

I pushed the door open with the front tire of the bike, walked the narrow room, put the bike against the back wall, grabbed Cat, and claimed the last booth. Cat climbed onto the scarred ta-

ble and settled by the napkin holder to wait for her snack.

A few minutes later Gretchen, a small lean woman with limp gray hair and wet gray eyes, slid a cup of coffee under my nose and slumped in the opposite seat. She looked at me, then at Cat, gave Cat a gentle pull on her ear, and smiled. "Cat don't look quite so bad."

"Annie says the nerve damage is slowly healing. Another few months and she should be about ninety percent recovered." I put my cup down. "You remember Everett Sooter? Used to live out at The Farm but had a accident about three years ago and was taken someplace?"

"Old Everett? Sure, he was a customer for years. Popped a head artery. When he didn't die, the hospital shipped him to Alton. He's in that home for veterans, hear the navy and the state share the cost of keeping him in pabulum."

"Is he . . . ahhh?" and I pointed at my skull.

She took a fair-sized chunk of beef out of her pocket and put it under Cat's nose. Cat pinned it to the table with a paw and pulled a piece out of it. "Harry, we're all a little . . . ahhh. But last I heard, Everett was holding his own. Mainly he's just damn old." She gazed at me. "What's your interest in Everett? Didn't think you knew the man."

"Nothing special. Victoria Drexel happened to mention him, and I thought I'd look him up if he was still alive."

"Ahh, Harry, you're on another quest, ain'tcha?"

The place where they warehoused Sooter was a large five story square of warped wood that had probably been built during the Civil War. I pedaled across the gravel parking lot to the verandah and locked the bike and trailer to the rotting rail. Cat jumped out, stretched, and held up a paw. I put her in the sling and walked up the steps, pulled open the ancient door, and entered a wide hall with dark paneled walls and high narrow windows.

Halfway down the hall was an alcove with a huge slab of a desk manned by a burly middle-aged woman dressed in an expensive looking plaid pantsuit. Perched on the back of her head was a Marine garrison cap with a skull and crossbones sewn on it. I walked to the desk and stood before it. I thought of standing at attention and saluting, but she looked fairly tough and I didn't want to incur her wrath.

She slowly looked up from her magazine, gazed at Cat and at me, and said, "You've never been in the service, we got a waiting list two hundred long, and we don't allow pets."

I leaned down so that Cat's furry face was maybe five inches from hers. "I'm profoundly happy to have never been in the service, I'm sure the residents are dropping like flies, you're inhuman for not allowing pets, and I'm here to see Everett Sooter."

She smiled and rubbed a finger

on Cat's nose. "Everett is in Room 311. Visits are limited to ten minutes. On the way out, stop by and tell me about the war your cat went through."

Room 311 was a large rectangle of ancient, much painted, wooden antique furniture and a wide iron bed with a small yellow man in it. Everett Sooter was truly old, little more than a sunken face impressed with deep seams, a million wrinkles, and cloudy eyes that might have been blue. Hanging from the wall was a television. It was on, and an attractive young woman was telling us to take a cruise to Bermuda. I took a deep breath, shuffled up to the bed, and looked down at the obsolete man, cleared my throat, and whispered, "Everett?"

He raised a skeletal hand mapped with bulging veins, pointed at the TV set, and whispered back. "Here I am damn near ninety years old, and all I can do is lie here on this goddamn bed and listen to some fool blabber on about places I'll never see. Good to see you again, Harry. Damn pathetic lookin' cat ya got there."

"Everett," I said, "everyone at The Farm sends their best. You're looking good."

His eyes widened. Then he smiled. "Pretty good for a corpse. I figure I'll be dead 'fore the end of the month. 'Bout time, kinda like to get it over with. When I was living at The Farm, you and I said maybe twenty words in eight or nine years, so I'll take it you didn't pedal your young ass all the way out here to tell me

some crap 'bout the folks wishing me well. Since the nurse is gonna kick you out of here in about five minutes, I suggest you get to it."

"I'm curious about the old tools hanging on the wall in the dining room. Victoria Drexel said most of them belonged to you."

"Yep. Used to be a handyman, back before everyone and his damn drunken brother was. When I went to The Farm, I took them with me. Just rusted in the storage room till Victoria got the idea of putting them on the wall."

"All the tools were yours?"

"'Course they were. Every tool I owned was mine. Damn fool question to ask a man."

"I meant, Everett, were all the tools on the wall yours? The hatchet with the carved handle, for instance. Was that yours?"

Sooter raised a trembling hand to his face, where it brushed his forehead, swept down his nose, and flopped back on the sheet. I took a deep breath and slowly let it out. Sooter gave me a purple-lipped grin. "See what you got to look forward to, Harry? Don't matter what you've done with your life; if some fool or virus don't kill you, this is what happens. That hatchet? I wouldn't let that piece of trash near my toolbox. Either Pullman or Kokar belonged to that thing."

"David Pullman?" I said. "The man who lived in that old Air-stream by the cornfield?"

Sooter slowly nodded. "The same. 'Twas either him or Duncan Kokar, Annie's boy. Around the time Victoria was hanging

the stuff up, they both came in and . . .” He closed his eyes and stopped talking. The only sound in the room was his labored breathing, like wind blowing through a cornfield. Then he opened his eyes. “I may be a dying bag of pus and gas, but the old noggin still works pretty good.” He pointed to his skull and closed both eyes again, and I realized he was trying to wink. “That Pullman fella put a saw and something else up while Victoria was setting the thing up. Later I remember Kokar said he’d like to put something up.”

“But he didn’t?”

Sooter pulled in another breath. “Not at the time, later maybe. Don’t really know, just that I remember him saying he’d like to put something up. A work in progress, he called it. A piece of crap I called it.”

Victoria took another sip. “If David Pullman had ever tried to carve anything with a knife, he’d have cut his fingers off. That man couldn’t walk and talk at the same time, much less try anything artsy with a sharp instrument.”

I helped myself to another glass of her wine. “If you’re sure of that, then Duncan Kokar is the one who made the hatchet. At least according to Sooter.”

“I suppose so. Although I’d hardly consider that little axe a worthwhile piece of Americana. But being Annie’s son, who’s to tell him different? Frankly, when we were through hanging the stuff up, it looked like what it

was, a wall full of rusty tools. What’s one more?”

“When did he put the hatchet on the wall?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I mean I noticed it but I couldn’t say when he put it there. It was just there one day. Actually I think he took it down a couple of times to hack at it some more, then stuck it back on the wall. Duncan fancies himself a woodcarver; whenever he comes here, he always pushes some lumpy piece of wood under your nose, wanting you to admire it.” She leaned a bit towards me, her predatory eyes gleaming. “Okay, Harry, what are you up to? What’s caused a fever in that brain of yours?”

I smiled. “Nothing. I’m just curious. It’s an odd little hatchet, and I wondered about its origins. Thank you for the wine.”

“Well, don’t get carried away. Duncan is Annie’s only son and, despite some obvious flaws, the apple of her eye.”

The smells drifting around Gretchen’s warm narrow room never fail to stir memories of my mother’s kitchen. I claimed the last booth, let Cat out, slumped back, and soaked in the aromas of fresh-baked rolls and roasting meat.

Gretchen plunked down a cup of coffee and a steaming dinner roll, tossed Cat a piece of pork, and said, “Hang around for another thirty minutes and I’ll treat ya to the Noonday Special, Gretchen’s Super Deluxe Home-made Bliss-Inducing Meatloaf.”

I smiled. "I'll pass, but if I ever need a patch for the boat, I'll drop by and buy a slice or two."

"Up yours, Harry. So how are things on The Farm? Anything happening? Anybody run off with anybody's wife? Duels at noon? Barn burn down? Crops fail?"

"Things are calm. It's damp and muddy, and The Hall smells like wet wool and dirty socks, and everybody is bragging about the gardens they grew last year."

"And you stay huddled up out in the pasture staring at the woodstove and petting the cat."

"You know Duncan Kokar?"

"Annie's son? Sure, back when he was a regular type he used to come in here sometimes. Usually bought the Noonday Special."

"Then?"

"Well, after about nineteen tries, he finally passed his real estate exam and started selling houses and right off the bat sold twelve acres on Newfound Lake to some developers, got a hell of a commission, and started going to brunch at Dillon's French Cafe."

I sipped coffee and petted Cat, who was staring off into the void, her paw resting on what was left of the piece of pork. "He have a wife or kids?"

"There's a daughter somewhere out west, Oregon? Anyways, she left with a second husband maybe fifteen years ago. After the wife left, I hear she doesn't bother to come back to visit."

"His wife left?"

"Yep, apparently got fed up with Duncan and went to Florida. Probably looked at all that tanned

muscle struttin' along the beach and decided to lay her towel on the sand and stay awhile."

"She played around?"

"Not that I can say. She was saucy, liked to flirt, but I always got the impression it was just the way she was. That she didn't mean no harm."

"So what was Duncan's reaction to his wife's leaving him and going to Florida?"

"Not too good. I remember the week after I heard about it I saw him walking down Main Street. He looked like death warmed over. Pale, nervous. Naturally I was curious, so I stopped and started up a conversation, like I didn't know, ya know? Duncan, I says, how's Angie? And he looks at me like I was some kind of she-devil and says, what do you mean? What did you hear?" Gretchen pulled on Cat's ear. "Hell, he was so shook I didn't even answer, just started walking down the street again."

She flicked the meat out from under Cat's paw. Cat pounced on it, looked at Gretchen, and gave a pitiable little hiss. Gretchen laughed. "Now, ain't that gratitude. So listen, Harry, you gonna tell me why you're so interested in Duncan?"

"I'm not sure. Just thought I'd see what the man was about."

She stared at me a moment. "Well, there ain't much to him if ya know what I mean. Just one of them fellows who are kinda always around. One of the girls over at Castle Realty told me he fancies himself a woodcarver. Proud as hell of the stuff he whit-



ties. I'd say the big event in his life was selling that Newfoundland. I hear that now he's lucky to sell three houses a year. Rumor has it Annie helps him out once in a while with a little cash."

"Where does Angie's family live?"

"When she lit out for Florida, people talked some, and the most I heard was she didn't have any. She was an only child. Her parents died early, and I never heard of any other kin, least none she'd own up to."

"How about friends?"

She slowly set her cup down. "Annie's mighty fond of that boy, you know."

"Most mothers love their sons. It doesn't seem to matter what they're about."

"Yeah, that's about half true. Well, Angie had a friend, older woman name of Jennifer Lock. Worked at the college till the arthritis twisted her fingers into pretzels. She's still around. Drinks some. Lives at Teller's Hotel."

The clerk at Teller's was a bent, pale man wearing a dark brown toupee that looked like a clump of rope glued to his head. I woke him and asked if he knew Jennifer Lock. He snorted and sniffed, blew his nose into a rancid piece of cotton, and wheezed, "Thirty-six."

I climbed unlit stairs, walked a dark hall that smelled of mildew and despair, and stopped at a much-painted door with the number thirty-six drawn on it with a yellow marker. I stood there smell-

ing the bad smells and thinking maybe I ought to go back to Gretchen's and grow older with a glass or two of the grape, smelling fresh-baked bread and grilled hamburger.

I raised my hand to knock and the door opened inward and I looked down at a small woman with sunken brown eyes and a face seamed by time, pain, and alcohol. She wore a faded print dress that hung on her body like a bag, and her dirty white hair stood out like it had been zapped by a thousand volts. A rush of warm, sweet air washed over me as I pasted a smile on my face. "Mrs. Lock? My name is Harry Neal. If you have some time, I'd like to talk with you." Silent and still, her gnarled hand on the door, she gazed up at me, a little bird wondering if she dare chirp.

Cat poked her head out of the sling and meowed. Jennifer Lock raised a trembling hand and patted Cat on the top of her head. "They won't let us have pets here." Her voice was a grated whisper that belonged in a B horror movie. "Come in, Mr. Neal, but you can't have any of my wine 'cause I ain't got much left."

Her room was L-shaped and littered with clothes, newspapers, and empty bottles of Mogen David 20/20. I lifted a pile of papers off a folding chair, dumped them on the metal table, and sat. Jennifer circled the table, grabbed a half empty glass of wine off the sill of the dusty window that overlooked the street, dragged a folding chair from the window,

and sat down across the table from me. She took several minuscule sips of her wine and with extreme care set the glass on the table. "You were a teacher," she said. "Taught history up at the college. I used to clean your classroom." She grunted, and a pained look crossed her face like a wave. "Used to clean your damned toilet, too. You and all the other teachers. Didn't even know I existed, you people."

A picture of a dim figure hunched over, pushing a wheeled bucket full of dirty water past my classroom, flashed into my mind. Had I ever said hello? Had I ever smiled at Jennifer Lock? I couldn't remember.

I forced another smile. "Mrs. Lock, I understand that before she moved to Florida you were a friend of Angie Kokar."

The hand holding the glass was twisted, the knuckles huge and knobby, the fingers bent sideways and down. She stared at that hand for a moment, then slowly lifted it and held it before her eyes and looked at it like it was on display in a glass case at a museum. She let the hand drop and it hit the table with a thump and she whispered, "Angie never went to Florida."

Cat crawled out of the sling, fell to the floor, and started nosing around. I said, "I think she did, Mrs. Lock. Several people, including her husband, have said so."

"Duncan Kokar can talk until he's a hundred and forty-nine and he'd still be lying."

The room was damp with heat,

and the smell of stale air settled in the back of my throat. I avoided looking at her hands and those pain-filled eyes. Instead I stared at a stain on the wall behind her. "How do you know?"

"I'm a good bit older than Angie, but we was good friends. If she was going to go somewheres, she'd have told me, and that's for sure. The thing is, what happened was, one night she fights with that husband of hers and the next day she's gone and he's saying she took off for Florida."

"How do you know they fought?"

"'Cause she called me a little after ten, after he'd hit her and stomped out of the house. She didn't call that much 'cause she knowed I had to go down to the lobby to answer. She said she'd upset Duncan good 'cause she was getting tired of his jealousy. That man swims in jealousy, had to know what she was about every waking moment."

She dragged her hand to the glass, took tiny swallows, and emptied it.

"Angie's lying in a grave somewheres, and that man is still alive and walking the streets and smiling at people. Angie's dead, and he's still walking the streets smiling at people."

We looked at each other. Then I stood. "I'll be back in a few minutes if that's all right with you."

She fondled the empty glass, burped quietly, and nodded. "Mebbe I can play with your cat while you're gone."

I was back in fifteen minutes. She was sitting at the table with

Cat in her lap. Cat meowed and waved a paw at me when I entered. I pulled two bottles of Mogen David 20/20, a pound each of roast beef and ham, a loaf of whole wheat bread, and several cans of soup out of a bag and put them on the table. I found a glass and poured us each a half a glass of Mogen David. Then I raised my glass in a toast and said, "Tell me about Angie Kokar."

Duncan Kokar's name was sixth on a list of seven printed in black on the front door of a modular house that held the offices of Castle Realty. I chained the bike and trailer to a utility pole, took the seat and Cat, and did as the flashing neon sign asked and went in.

In a room to my left were file cabinets, copier, fax, and a sad looking woman slumped at a desk reading *People* magazine. To my right was a square room with five desks crammed between file cabinets, folding tables, and a minikitchen. Two of the desks were occupied by women busy with computers. Toward the back of the room Duncan Kokar was leaning back in his desk chair, hands clasped behind his head, staring out a window.

He had gained weight. His round face, cooked by hours in a tanning booth, sagged with the heft of excess fat, and browned flesh floated around his collar like an innertube. The last time I'd seen him, perhaps two months ago, his hair had been salt and pepper colored. Now it was a deep

black and curled over his ears and the back of his shirt.

I threaded my way through the room, sat down in the cushioned folding chair by his desk, and said, "Good afternoon, Duncan, mind if I take up a little of your time?"

He gave me a small smile and let his feet drop. "Harry, it's been a while, How's Mom? I haven't been out for a few weeks." He hit the top of his desk twice and pointed at his computer. "Been pretty busy."

Crowded around his computer and mouse pad were nine or ten carvings. I picked one up and examined it. It was probably meant to be a bear, but the head was too small, the front legs too large, and the rear legs were pencil thin. I smiled and put the carving down. "She's good, working too hard as always, running the farm with an iron hand and a soft heart. You'd better buy a few roses and get out there or she'll feed you to the wolves."

He gave the obligatory laugh. I stared at him. The smile slowly drifted off his face. He cleared his throat and pushed his chair back a few inches. "So, Harry, you decide for something a little bigger than that boat? Want to live in a real house here in town? I got some good deals, probably could find something even you could afford."

"No, Duncan, the boat is fine. Actually I dropped by to get Angie's address."

He froze, just for an instant, then gave that little laugh again. "Angie's address?"

"Yesterday it occurred to me that I haven't talked to her in years, and I got to wondering about her. How she's doing, what she's doing, and so forth. So I thought I'd drop her a line and renew our friendship."

He picked up a carving and began to turn it around in his hand. "You—you and Angie were . . . friends?"

I smiled. "Not friends, exactly. Sometimes I saw her in Gretchen's, and we'd talk. As you well know, she loved history, especially medieval history, and since I once taught history at the college, she would ask me questions. She was particularly interested in the daily life of the average citizen. She would drink her green tea and I'd drink decaf and we'd talk of the trials and tribulations of the average person trying to survive in medieval England. And sometimes we'd chat about gardening. I must have heard a dozen times about the garden you two had in your back yard."

I gave him about an eighty watt smile, pulled out my brand-new notebook and pen, and said, "So if you'll just give me her address, and phone number if you have it, I'll be on my way, and you can get back to selling houses." I sat there, pen poised over paper, grinning at him, waiting.

He gripped the carving and stared at me. I held his gaze and my smile and waited. "Well, ah, that is, ah, you must realize, Harry, that I haven't heard from Angie in years. She left me, left

me cold. I don't want to go into the details with you, but ah, well, she left me cold, we aren't exactly on speaking terms."

I laid the pen across the notebook. "Yes, but you did get a divorce, didn't you?"

"Well, ah, yes, yes, of course."

"Well then, just give me the last address you have for her, the one you sent the papers to." I picked up the pen and grinned and waited.

"Listen, I don't have it. I threw everything away. Her leaving me, it—it was all very disturbing, and I wanted to wash it out of my mind. I threw everything away once it was settled, and I don't remember what the address was."

I laid the pen across the notebook and scratched Cat's ears. "What city is she living in? Surely you remember that?"

"Yes, yes of course I do. It—it was, ah, Tampa, yes, Tampa, but she moved right after the divorce, and I don't know where to."

I stood, pocketed the notebook, and, keeping the silly grin on my face, said, "Tampa. I can call the courthouse down there. They most certainly have a forwarding address." I thrust out my hand. "Thanks, Duncan, I appreciate your time. I'll say hello to Angie for you. Perhaps now that a little time has passed, you two can start talking again."

He stumbled to his feet and shook my hand. His grip was warm and wet. "Yeah, well, any time, Harry. It—it was good to see you again."

With what I hoped was a purposeful stride, I walked out of Castle Realty and pedaled away. I stopped at Gretchen's, chatted briefly with her, and headed home.

The ride back to The Farm was hastened by cold, sporadic rain. By the time I turned down the drive and aimed for the pasture gate, I was a damp old man. As I pedaled into the barn's shadow, Annie stepped onto her porch and held up her hand. I stopped and straddled the bike as she marched up to me.

Annie is in her seventies, looks it, is tough and soft, and loves animals and humans, probably in that order. A semiretired veterinarian and good friend, it was she who had labored over Cat for hours, saving her life. I have fond memories of many hours spent at her kitchen table conversing about anything and everything except the trivial, the insipid, and the mundane.

She stopped in front of the bike, folded her arms across her bony chest and stated, "You do not know Angie. You never knew her. What's going on, Harry? Why do you want that woman's address?"

I met her hard stare. "On the contrary. Angie and I spent hours at Gretchen's. We both have a love of history and a sense of the irony that oftentimes caps the Human Endeavor."

"As I remember her, that woman would hardly qualify for intellectual status."

I shrugged with my eyebrows and plunged ahead, hoping that

Jennifer Lock, no intellectual herself, was astute in her judgment of Angie. "That's true, but it's interest, passion for a subject, that precedes knowledge, and Angie's interest in and passion for history were deep and sincere. Surely you were aware of that; you must have spent considerable time with her before she left Duncan. And why are you so concerned, Annie? All I want is an address."

She shook her head, creating a halo of fine mist around her iron gray hair. "I'm not sure. Duncan called and told me you wanted Angie's address. He was upset."

"Why would he be upset? Christ, they've been divorced for what?—ten years now."

"When Angie left, Duncan was devastated. Your interest, however casual, is dredging up those memories. I would appreciate it if you'd stay away from Duncan and let Angie be. She's well entrenched in her Florida life now, no sense in stirring the waters."

"Yes, of course. But I don't understand what the problem is."

"Duncan is a fine man, but he's sensitive, more sensitive than most, and the world disturbs him more because of it. You and I, we're somewhat hardened to the 'Human Endeavor,' as you put it. Also, there's your propensity for digging into other people's lives. You're a lamprey, Harry: once you clamp onto something, you don't let go. And your swimming around Duncan is worrisome. Your knowing Angie, much less having long talks with her, is something I have a hard time

swallowing." She turned abruptly and stalked away. I stayed, letting the cold rain run down my face until Cat stuck her head out of the trailer and meowed, telling me supper takes precedence over human folly.

The alarm woke me at one fifteen. I crawled out of bed and listened to the rain patter on the boat while I dressed. Umbrella clutched in hand, I pushed on the hatch and felt a gentle tug on my pants cuff.

What's the penalty for contributing to the delinquency of a cat? Umbrella bent to the rain, we trudged across the pasture to the barn. I slunk along the rough boards, keeping in the deep shadows and avoiding the outside lights that created fuzzy orange circles sparkling with crystal drops of falling water. I eased the door open, slipped through, and closed the umbrella.

I waited for an eternity or so, then keeping my feet to the outside climbed the stairs and entered The Hall. The serving line, tables, and islands of furniture were dark shadows dimly outlined by the one nightlight. Cat began purring, very loudly it seemed. I hurried across the room to the fireplace, took the hatchet off the wall, stuck it in my belt, and made for the stairs.

As I brushed by a dark island of furniture, a figure rose up, and a sharp finger jabbed me in the neck. I yelped, jerked to a stop, and gaped at the person who stood before me. Mildred gave a slow, deep

laugh, washing me in essence of cheap wine, and whispered, "Harry, I must hand it to you. Most of us are content to let our lives drift on and on until we take to our final bed. But you! You prow about, poking in other people's lives and leaving scorchmarks on their souls. I don't know whether to envy you or pray for you."

I let out a long breath and put a hand on Cat's head. I could feel my heart banging away beneath her body. I sucked in another breath and said, "You rise up from the depths like that again, and you're going to have to administer CPR. Jesus, you scared me."

"Didn't mean to. I was sitting here listening to the rain, taking the grape and thinking about things, when you went skulking across the room. Had Ida Cook drive me over to see Everett Sooter this afternoon. Kind of wish I hadn't. He's going to be dead in a few days. He said you were out to see him, asking questions about those tools." She flicked a finger against the hatchet in my belt.

I shuffled a bit to my right and sat down in an oversized chair that smelled vaguely like wet wool. "When Duncan Kokar was still married, did he and Angie spend much time here?"

Mildred sat on the near end of a long, sagging couch, picked up a large bottle, drank, and handed me the bottle. "No, not much, as I remember. Angie wasn't fond of Annie and vice-versa. Just the obligatory Sunday afternoon dinner and some holidays, Christmas, Easter, things like that."



I took a long pull from the bottle. A little better than Mogen David but only a little. "What do you think of him?"

"A nice enough man. Not an achiever. He fancies himself a woodcarver. On one occasion years ago when he and Angie dined with us, he took that hatchet down and fondled it like a newborn. Told anybody who'd listen it was his first real work. He was proud as hell to have it up on that wall. Otherwise he seemed content to just get by and live in his dreams. Dreams are a lot easier than doing, one doesn't have to work to become, one just floats back in the mind and runs the movie."

She reached out, and I put the bottle in her hand.

"So what does he do now? Besides woodcarving. Any hobbies? Compulsions?"

"Now, how would I know? The man comes out here maybe once a month. And that's to see his mother, not me. I do know that back when Angie was around they spent a lot of time in their garden. Angie loved gardening, but I'd bet a nickel he hasn't been in it since she took off." She drank and handed me the bottle. We were quiet for awhile, sitting in the gloom, handing the bottle back and forth and probing the veils of our minds. Then Mildred stood and as she walked away brushed her hand across my cheek and whispered, "I think I will pray for you, Harry."

Armed with two bottles of Mogen David and a dozen cans of

soup, I tapped on Jennifer Lock's door. She opened the door, and her pain-damaged face eased into a smile. I gave a little bow. "I've brought wine and sustenance. May I come in?"

I fussed around a bit, getting her seated, getting wine poured, and nudging a somewhat reluctant Cat into her lap. Then I said, "The last time I plied you with wine I asked about Angie. Now I'd like to talk a little more about the both of them."

She wrapped her tortured hand around the water glass and took several small sips. Then she put the wine down and dragged her fingers over Cat's head. Cat gave me a look.

"I told you Angie's dead," she said. "I know it sure as you're sitting there. Why talk about them? It ain't going to bring her back."

I pulled the little plastic bag out of my inside jacket pocket, opened it, and laid the piece of bone beside her glass. She looked at it; then, using both hands, she picked up the bone and pushed it into the palm of her left hand. She stared at it for a moment, then looked at me.

I nodded. "You're right, she's dead."

Duncan lived in a modular house halfway down Pine Street. Most of the houses on the block were modular or double-wide mobile homes. In several, windows flickered with the spastic glow of televisions. I pedaled past Duncan's house to the end of the street and turned right. After

maybe fifty feet the road ended abruptly. I dropped down several gears, stood on the pedals, and bulled my way through partly melted ground to a line of scrub pine. Pushing the bike into the trees brought meows of nervous protest from Cat, so I put her in the sling, zipped my jacket, and shoved the bike deeper in.

Leaving it, I walked back until I was past the treeline and made my way through cluttered back yards until I was standing just inside the trees of Duncan's yard. I kneaded Cat's neck for a moment, then crept across the grass until I was standing by the patio at the back of the house.

Jennifer Lock and Mildred were right. Even in the gloom of night it was obvious that Duncan hadn't been doing any gardening. One patch—a long, narrow tangle of vines and warped, broken sticks—was just off the patio. Another, skirting a flattened picket fence, ran the length of the yard, ending at the treeline. And I found the third in a clearing in the trees, just past the far edge of the property, its picket fence half buried in the weeds and brush.

By the time I got back to the bike, my shoes were soaked and heavy with mud. Cat was anxious, squirming about and meowing. I felt around the trailer, found her leash, and snapped it on. By the time she had thoroughly explored half the block and condescended to leave a few well placed tokens, I was anxious and meowing.

Halfway home it started to

rain again; by the time I closed the hatch I was soaked, shivering, and in dire need of support. I slumped on the settee, stared at the fire, and drank my support directly from the bottle. When the bottle was empty, I shuffled off to bed. When Cat meowed to come up, I was still wide awake, wandering a maze of decayed gardens and tortured souls.

As I pedaled past the barn, Annie stepped out on her porch and beckoned. Reluctantly, I stopped and waited. She folded her arms and stared at me.

"You're looking at me as if I were an item you bought at an auction and then realized you paid too much for."

She gave a fleeting smile. "I stopped by Gretchen's, I haven't seen her in awhile. Her minestrone soup still leaves something to be desired. At any rate, apparently you and Angie did have numerous conversations at the restaurant, and I apologize for my outburst."

I said a silent thanks to Gretchen and managed a smile. "I'm sorry I upset you, Annie. All I wanted was Angie's address."

She slowly nodded, her hard, probing eyes never leaving mine. Finally she inhaled deeply and said, "It wasn't me that was upset, it was Duncan. I realize that I tend to mother him and fret and fuss over him like an anxious hen, but Duncan is . . . that is, he's not as strong as most people, most men. Even though he's fifty-four, he still requires . . .

help. When Angie departed, it devastated him and I..." Annie stopped. "But I've said that already, haven't I?" She gave me a pat on the shoulder. "You have a good day, Harry. And bring Cat in sometime. I should give her another exam, although she appears fairly healthy for what she's gone through."

Betty Worthen has been the town's meter maid and only policewoman for almost fifteen years. She's short, weighs around two hundred pounds despite all the walking, and knows the town and its people better than God. Her values are variable and subject to rationalization, and we are tolerant of and respect one another's silliness.

When I found her near Jack O'Conner's Japanese restaurant, she was putting a parking ticket under the wiper of a brilliant green BMW with plates emblazoned with a Purple Heart. I tapped her ticket book with a finger. "The man gets wounded in the service of this country and you give him a parking ticket?"

She smiled, turning her round face into a cartoon. "The man is an arrogant SOB who thinks he's entitled to stuff he truly doesn't deserve."

"You're the judge. Listen, I'd like to treat you to a bowl of Gretchen's French Onion Soup."

She jammed her ticket book into a black leather pouch next to a small revolver in a black leather holster, both of which were fastened to a wide, thick, black leath-

er belt hung with six or seven other black leather pouches. She hitched the whole mess up past her hips and said, "Is this going to be Happy Talk? Or are you going to depress me again? I get depressed enough just looking at that cat you tote around."

"It's less than pleasant."

She sighed and patted Cat. "Throw in a half liter of wine and we'll do it."

Betty tore the last of her Swiss cheese into little bits, dropped them in the empty bowl, and shoved the bowl under Cat's nose. Cat, who loves cheese above all else, put a paw on her sleeve and dived in. Betty poured the last of the wine in her cup. "Okay. Consider me bribed."

"Do you happen to know Duncan Kokar?"

"Don't know him personally. Know of him. Lives in a modular over on Pine, sells real estate, does poorly at it. He's porking the office secretary, who I happen to know has about every kind of herpes one can have. And his mommy is the owner of that retirement farm you live on."

"Know anything about his wife?"

"Ex-wife. She got fed up and fled to Florida about ten years ago. Word had it that old Duncan was a mite too jealous and sometimes patted her face a little too hard. I didn't know her, but in my opinion it was probably a pretty good move on her part."

"I don't think she went to Florida. I think Duncan killed her and buried her in his back yard."

She blinked twice, shoved away from the edge of the table, and stared at me. "Jesus, Harry, what the hell have you been up to now?" She ran her hand through her short brown hair. "Proof?"

I took out the piece of bone and dropped it in her hand. Like Forrest Raffa she turned it over and over in her palm, examining it carefully. Then she handed it back. "Why the hell can't you just putter around the barn and drool in your wine like those other geezers out there?"

I knocked on Duncan's door—just as the streetlights were coming on. He looked a little startled when he saw it was me, but he managed a smile. "Harry? What—that is, what brings you here? Change your mind about a house?"

"May I come in, Duncan? I have something to discuss with you."

He walked backwards into the house. I followed, trying to calm an agitated Cat, who undoubtedly sensed my apprehension.

"That cat. It doesn't look too well. It's not going to be sick on my rug, is it?"

I walked past him into the living room and sat down in an old wing chair. Cat wormed out of the sling, fell to the floor, and began exploring. The room was full of carvings. Big and little lumps of wood decorated the coffee table, endtables, and the mantel of the gas fireplace. Duncan started to say something, stopped, slowly sank onto the near end of a maroon couch, and looked at me.

I undoubtedly looked absurd,

but I had to do it. I opened my jaw wide and worked it back and forth while Duncan, his hands clasped together, stared at me. Finally I felt I could talk. I reached under my coat, pulled out the hatchet, and held it in front of me.

Duncan made a little sound in the back of his throat, and stammered, "What—what are you doing with that?"

I waved the hatchet in front of his face. I was trembling, and my voice cracked. "Nine years ago you took this from the fireplace wall and brought it here to carve on. You referred to it as a work in progress. Then, late on July fifteenth nine years ago, you used it to hack Angie to death. After you killed her, you buried her somewhere."

With badly shaking hands I fished the piece of bone out of my pocket, turned the hatchet over, and managed to fit the bone into the hole I had dug it out of.

I wrenched the bone out of the hole. "You hit her so hard you shattered her skull, a piece of which became embedded in the handle." I stood up and said in my most malevolent whisper, "And tomorrow I'll start looking for the rest of her." I scooped up a startled Cat and stumbled out.

I pedaled to the end of the street and up the road. As I'd done last night, I pulled into the trees, rested the bike against a bush, walked the treeline to Duncan's back yard, crawled under the branches of an old pine tree, and sat down, leaning against the trunk. It was cloudy and misting, but window light gave

me a murky view of the yard. Cat fussed a bit and meowed. I put a hand on her head, and she calmed down and started purring.

Time crawled by, and the cold seeped into my flesh. I took frequent nips from my support bottle and warmed my free hand on Cat's tummy.

Abruptly the lights in Duncan's house went out. I heard scuffling noises like an animal prowling about and the muted clank of metal on metal; then a figure scuttled around the garage to the patio garden. A flashlight blinked on, off, on again for maybe thirty seconds, went out again. A minute later I heard the sounds of digging.

They had buried her deep. His ragged breathing rolling over the yard, Duncan worked in controlled frenzy, all the while mumbling unintelligibly in a discordant singsong. It started to rain; a cold dribble dropped from the tree and ran down my face. Cat squirmed and complained, and I scratched her ears.

For over an hour Duncan attacked the soil, his dark form going ever deeper. Then he stopped. His light flashed on and off, and he started taking things out of the hole. His light would go on for a few seconds, flick off, and I'd hear the soft clacking of bones as they were tossed in a growing pile. Finally he dragged himself out of the muck of that garden grave. He wiped his face and head with a soaked towel, squatted, and began shoving bones into a large plastic bag.

Betty Worthen stepped out of the trees, walked up to Duncan, shone her six-battery flashlight directly in his face. "Good evening, Duncan. Good evening, Angie. Hell of a night, isn't it?"

Duncan sank to the ground at her feet and covered his face with his hands. His cries sounded like a hurt puppy's as he floundered there. Betty unhooked the microphone on her shoulder and muttered into it. Then she stooped and with the efficiency and quickness of practice snapped cuffs on Duncan and pulled him to his feet.

I didn't do much the next week. I stayed in the grove, puttering around or reading or playing simulations on the computer. I spent a lot of time lying in bed, usually with Cat snuggled against me, staring at the ceiling.

Twice I pedaled to town and sat in Gretchen's and drank wine and read the paper. Duncan's arrest and Angie's bones were big news. Betty Worthen was getting her fifteen minutes of fame, and I was where I wanted to be: anonymous, nonexistent. I didn't see Annie.

On an evening bright with distant stars and a deep, hard cold, Annie climbed the ladder and rapped hard on the hatch. I pushed it open and held her arm as she climbed down. She pulled off her coat and sat on the settee and looked at me with eyes a thousand years old. "Give me a glass of wine, Harry."

I poured us water glasses full of cheap rosé and sat across from

her. Cat climbed into her lap, purring for all she was worth. With one hand Annie stroked Cat and with the other downed a third of her wine. She grimaced. "This wine should stand beside Gretchen's soups."

I shrugged. "I like it. Probably because I can afford it and tell myself it's good."

"Duncan went to prison this afternoon. He plea-bargained." She drank another third of the wine. Her dark-rimmed eyes bored into me. "Twenty years. Perhaps fifteen with good behavior. He is not a healthy man. I assume he will die in prison. I am to be allowed two visits per month. Even if he lives, I will be dead well before he is freed. It seems your persistence has destroyed us, Harry."

"You're grieving and despondent. I don't think either one of you will die. In time you will adapt and cope."

"Almost ten years, Harry. Duncan has suffered grievously over those years. His crime diminished him greatly. He paid. You could have left him alone."

"He hacked Angie to death. Butchered her not for anything she did but for what he imagined she did. To paraphrase a friend, 'Angie lies in infinite nothing while he walks the street and smiles at people.'"

"It was over, through, all these years. You could've left it alone."

"I could have set my trap on any other night besides the night you do the free animal clinic down in Franklin."

The glass stopped halfway to

her lips. She blinked once, slowly. The seconds drifted by. Finally she whispered, "So you do know."

"From all accounts, and my personal dealings with him, well, I just don't think Duncan could have functioned intelligently after killing his wife with a hatchet. I knew he had help, and I assumed it was you." I forced my face into a shallow grin. "What are mothers for?"

She dipped her head and savaged her face with her long bony hands. "He called that night. He was incoherent. I hadn't the slightest idea what he was ranting about. I drove like a madwoman. I found him in the garage, in the corner, huddled against a wheelbarrow. His hands and shirt were filthy with her blood."

"I found her—Angie—outside, just off the patio. Her head was a mess, blood everywhere. I didn't even question it, didn't even consider anything else. I got shovels. I talked to Duncan like he was a child again, like the child I loved and nurtured. I got him to function, and we buried her in the patio garden. The one she loved best."

"We concocted the Florida story. The first months were sheer hell, but we got through it, my son and I, together we got through it. And gradually a sense of normality returned. I thought we'd persevered. I thought we'd made it. The last few years've been . . . pleasant. Then Duncan called—you'd been at his office asking for Angie's address." She was quiet for a moment. "It was I who in-



sisted on cleaning the hatchet and returning it to the barn wall. I thought people would miss it, maybe ask questions. Duncan wanted to bury it with Angie." She gave me a ghastly smile, closed her eyes, and shook her head. "I should have listened."

Cat jumped-fell off Annie's lap and tottered into the forward cabin. "For what it's worth, Annie, I was profoundly relieved that Duncan was alone when he came out of the house to exhume Angie. I thought he might manage to get hold of you."

"No. No," she whispered. "He said—he said it was something he wanted to do, the burden was his and he wanted to spare me. He said he knew he could handle it. He said he was confident until that policewoman shone the light on him. I assume you were lurking nearby, observing the results of your handiwork."

"I slunk away as the officer was cuffing him."

She stood up and paced the cabin, stopping to splash wine in her glass and, with trembling hands, gulp it down. I watched her pace: three steps and turn, three steps and turn. Cat watched from the dark doorway, her eyes wide with wonder. Finally Annie stopped, faced me, and said, "You spared me because of The Farm."

"You didn't kill Angie. You were simply being a mother." I swept my arm in an arc. "There are seventy people here on The Farm. Old people. Destitute people. You are needed."

She made a face.

"God damn you, Harry Neal. God damn you! Who gives you the right to play judge? Who gives you the right to destroy people's lives?"

She hugged herself and glared at me. Then she shuddered. "I don't think I can manage your living on The Farm after—after this."

"There's an old woman, Jennifer Lock. She lives in Room 36 at Teller's Hotel. She's alone, destitute, and drinks. I think it would be nice if you were to seek her out and bring her to The Farm. I think it would be nice if she could spend a few years in The Farm's community. I will be gone by mid-April."

Three steps and turn, three steps and turn. Then she stopped and said, "I will see the Lock woman tomorrow and have her moved in by tomorrow night. And I will look forward to your departure." She climbed the ladder, gently closed the hatch, and walked out of the grove.

Later, deep in the night, I returned the hatchet to the Hall. If it stays, it stays. If it is removed, well, that's fine also. I made sure Mildred wasn't huddled in a chair. She wasn't. I walked behind the serving tables to a line of three big refrigerators, opened the middle one, and removed a liter of wine. There's no fighting with a corkscrew with wine that costs two dollars a liter, just unscrew the cap and drink.

# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the March issue.*

"You wanted to see me, chief?" I asked.

The head of the FBI replied, "Yes, Yager. I just had an unusual call from our ambassador to Austria. He didn't want to mention names on the phone, but he said he feared for the lives of Samson and Delilah."

"*Samson and Delilah?* Sounds like a jokester's pulling your leg, sir."

"That occurred to me, so I had the call traced. It did come from the ambassador's office. Get over there and find out what this is all about."

The day was pleasant (for Washington, that is), so I walked to the Austrian embassy. I was immediately ushered into the ambassador's office. "Joe Yager, FBI, sir," I began. "I came in response to your phone call to my chief. What's this business about 'Samson and Delilah'?"

"My wife and I are giving a little costume party for a group of six other ambassadors and their wives," the ambassador told me. "We've all agreed to come as Antony and Cleopatra, Czar Nicholas and Alexandra, George and Martha Washington, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, Romeo and Juliet, or Samson and Delilah. One couple is from China."

"Sounds like a grandiose affair," I said. "What's the problem?"

"I received an anonymous note this morning warning me that an attempt would be made on the lives of the couple dressed as Samson and Delilah. I discussed it with Ambassador Perkins, who will be attending with his wife, and he thinks we should take the matter seriously. I'd like you and a few other agents to be there as waiters, to keep everything under control and take any necessary measures."

The night of the ball my two assistants and I circulated among the elaborately costumed people, dispensing cocktails and canapes. We also picked up tidbits of information from the conversations. An hour later we compared notes. We had discovered that—

(1) Frieda (who was not Norman's wife), the wife dressed as Juliet (who wasn't Eleanor), and the wife of the ambassador to Germany included Mrs. Raddock, Mrs. Simpson, and Mrs. Underwood (who was not married to Karl).

(2) Mark wasn't the ambassador to either Austria or Denmark.

(3) John (who was not dressed as George Washington), Mr. Under-

wood, and the ambassador to Bulgaria were married (in some order) to Alice, Catherine, and Belinda (who wasn't Mrs. Raddock).

(4) Five of the women were Belinda (who wasn't Ivan's wife), Dorothy (whose husband wasn't the ambassador to Estonia), Mrs. O'Hara, Norman's wife, and the lady dressed as Juliet.

(5) Genevieve's husband was neither Ivan nor Karl.

(6) The wives of Harold, Mr. O'Hara, and the ambassador to Estonia were dressed as Queen Victoria, Czarina Alexandra (not portrayed by Mrs. Raddock), and Marie Antoinette (not portrayed by the wife of the ambassador to Denmark).

(7) Harold, Larry, and Mark were the husbands of Mrs. Trent (who wasn't dressed as Martha Washington), the lady dressed as Marie Antoinette, and Eleanor (who was neither the wife of the ambassador to Germany nor the one dressed as Delilah). None of the three men was the ambassador to France.

(8) Norman (who was not married to Alice), Mr. Queen, and Genevieve's husband (who wasn't Mr. Trent) included the ambassadors to Austria, Bulgaria, and Denmark.

Nothing unusual happened during the five-course dinner that followed the happy hour. As the grandfather clock in the hallway chimed ten, the little combo hired for the occasion began playing some oldies to start the dancing. Then it happened.

The drummer dropped his sticks and leveled a Luger at the couple dressed as Samson and Delilah. Leaping onto the bandstand, I knocked the weapon from his grasp with one quick karate chop. In seconds my assistants had the would-be assassin in handcuffs.

*Which couple was targeted for assassination?  
For what country was the man an ambassador?*

See page 142 for the solution to the January puzzle.

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FICTION



# ONE OF OUR BEARS IS MISSING

DeLoris  
Stanton Forbes

*Illustration by Laura Jacobsen*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 2/99*

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**M**rs. Rutherford put her American Express card in her jogging suit pocket and left her husband a note. It read:

*"I've just found out I'm a bear.*

*"Not a real bear, but a stuffed bear.*

*"I have no idea how it happened nor when it happened nor why it happened, but here I am, a puffy, fuzzy, frozen-faced bear.*

*"If I am to be a bear, please, God, make me a Steiff bear or a Paddington bear or a Pooh bear. . . I want to be a nice bear, a happy bear . . . oh, I so want to be a happy bear!"*

Then she disappeared.

"When was the last time you saw your wife?" J. Ames Rutherford wore a suit that must have set him back half my year's rent (okay, so I don't live in Heathrow, my accommodations are, shall we say, minimal). Anyway, he looked as sharp as the weather guy on Channel 2, and that one was some dude. I figured Rutherford was maybe in his late forties, ten years my senior. His wheat-colored hair had been "coiffed," and his neckwear came under the heading of designer tie. If I had taken an instant dislike to him, it could have been because he made me feel like a dryerful of unironed laundry.

Even my partner George looked better than I did when we were both wearing the same uniform.

My feelings must have shown

in my voice because Rutherford scowled at me, and George cleared his throat. I toned it down. "You say she was wearing a jogging suit?"

Rutherford sighed, erasing the frown. "JoAnne had recently taken up jogging; she ran every morning before it was really light. She said she felt like an idiot trotting around like that, she didn't want anyone to see her, so she got up early and went at it. I didn't actually see her leave. I was still in bed. When I went down for breakfast around eight o'clock, she wasn't back yet, and the note was on the kitchen counter."

I checked my notes. "But you didn't report her missing until eleven oh-six last night."

"In the morning I figured she'd stopped off somewhere. Maybe at McDonald's for an Egg McMuffin. She wasn't supposed to eat that stuff, she was on a strict diet, but I had a hunch when I saw she'd taken her credit card that she wanted to be sure she could indulge herself.

"JoAnne has a weight problem, you see. She's had it since she was a kid, and it's hard for her to change lifelong habits. Especially at her age. Anyway, I had coffee on the quick and went off to my office. I'd overslept a little, so I was behind schedule. We're Rutherford's, you know. The wholesale discount clothing conglomerate." That last statement was accompanied by a self-satisfied smile.

When I didn't react, he went on. "I got into the office just after nine thirty—a big hangup on I-4



again, as usual—and I worked straight through until maybe six thirty. Then I had a drink with the sportswear buyer (we're pushing our new line of health club Spandex), which turned into dinner at Pinocchio's, and I didn't get home until well after ten. That's when I called and reported her missing."

"You didn't try to reach her during the day?"

He shook his pretty head. "Oh, I did. I got the answering machine, but that was to be expected. JoAnne seldom spent the day at home, she was always off to something, luncheon with her friends or shopping, bridge, you know the stuff women do."

I scribbled *sportswear buyer?* in my book and studied Mrs. Rutherford's note. "How do you figure this bear business?"

"Oh. That. Come, I'll show you." And he led us down the broad hallway to a bedroom, strike that, a bear room. There were stuffed bears on the bed, in chairs large and chairs small, on shelves where books should have been; everywhere a bear could sit or lie a bear sat or reclined, bears in every sort of dress and costume, princess bears, storybook bears, sporting bears, baby bears, even a grandfather bear with specs.

"You get the point, I trust?" asked Rutherford. I got the point.

"Is this your bedroom?" George wanted to know.

"God, no. This was once a guest room before the bears took over. My room's down the hall, hers is just beyond. Would you like to

see . . . sure you would, maybe you'll spot something I didn't . . . I checked to see if she'd packed a suitcase or anything, but so far as I could tell, everything's here." And he thrust open a door that revealed a bedroom that must have been the result of a swishy decorator's dream. The bed was canopied in pink and white. Ruffles yet. The curtains were clouds of pink and white. The carpet was as thick and white as polar bear fur; on the mirror-topped bureau were fancy pink perfume bottles etched with white cherubs and butterflies. The room was immaculate, no trace of human occupation. Whatever else she was, JoAnne Rutherford was nasty-neat.

Her husband strode across the polar bear carpet, flung open white louvered doors that opened on a walk-in closet. The large closet held very few garments, and I looked questioningly at him. He shrugged.

"Like I said, she was on this strict diet. She junked most of her old stuff, kept just enough to wear for the duration. She said she'd never again wear a size . . . well, I don't really know what size it was she'd never wear again, she was pretty secretive about it.

"Anyway, she had Wanda, her maid, bundle up the clothes and take them down to the Habitat for Humanity thrift shop. Which explains how I knew that she didn't take anything with her. With a selection this small, I'd know right off if anything was missing."

"You got a picture of your wife? We'll need one for an I.D."





"No pictures. Not one. She wouldn't have her picture taken. She was adamant about that, any news photographers took a snapshot, I had to pay them off and burn the negatives while she watched. So, sorry, no pictures."

"All right, no pictures. Give me a verbal snapshot, then. Color of hair, eyes, height. Let's start with age. How old was . . . is she?"

"JoAnne had just hit the big five-five, but she didn't really look her age. Because of the weight problem, you know. Keeps the wrinkles away, I guess. Her hair? Lately it's a shade called rose-blonde. Kind of a pinky yellow, she got that idea from a line of sportswear we got in for summer, had her hair dyed to match. JoAnne's got a lot of kooky ideas like that . . . anyway, her eyes are hazel, she's just a little under five foot two, on the short side—that's another thing that accentuates the roly-poly look—that's about all I can tell you. She didn't have any birthmarks, tattoos, stuff like that."

"How long have you been married?"

He looked surprisingly proud.

"Twenty years next June. JoAnne and I were—are looking forward to our silver anniversary in 2005. I think it's 2005, let's see, we were married in . . ."

George, who'd been playing statue, came to life, pulled open a dresser drawer and poked in it, shut it, opened another. He came up with a jewelry case, opened that and looked in.

"That's costume stuff," said

Rutherford. "She kept her good jewelry in the safe deposit box."

George shut the jewelry box, poked around some more.

I was studying the footwear. It seemed she had small feet. Her collection consisted of a half dozen pairs of fairly new running shoes by different makers, another half dozen high-heeled pumps in various colors, six or seven pairs of sandals including gold and silver ones, bedroom slippers in white, in pink, in white *and* pink . . . "Plenty of shoes," I commented.

"She doesn't think her feet will change size. She's rather vain about her feet." I caught an expression on her husband's face that maybe meant distaste, but I couldn't be sure since I had to season my impressions of Rutherford with the usual salt grain.

"You said she was wearing running clothes this morning. Which ones, what color?"

"I assume she was—here, she kept them in this drawer. Let's see, she had gray and tan and pink and . . . She must have been wearing . . . uh-huh, she must have been wearing the blue. A dark blue, not quite navy. JoAnne quite correctly believes that dark colors make one look thinner."

"You said you had dinner with a buyer. We'll need the name of your dinner partner. Just for the record." He told me, and I wrote down Gretchen Steiger after my *sportswear buyer?*, added her address when Rutherford passed it along. And then I said, "You mentioned the maid Wanda. Does



Wanda live here? No? How about her address then? We'd like to have a little chat with Wanda. Sometimes ladies tell their maid things they might not tell their husbands."

He reacted to that by bristling. "Wanda! What can Wanda tell you? JoAnne wouldn't confide in her maid." His expression said "moron!"

In return I gave him my "I'm just a dumb cop doing my job" look. "We'd appreciate your cooperation, Mr. Rutherford. We're sure that you want us to talk to anybody who might possibly have an idea that could help us find your wife . . ."

"Of course. Of course. Sorry if I seem edgy, truth is I am edgy. At first I thought she'd just gone off somewhere, JoAnne is the independent type, she'll do whatever she decides to do whether you like it or not, but now that more than twenty-four hours have passed, I'm beginning to think—come on, I'll get Wanda's address for you and anything else you need. Do you think it would be a good idea to offer a reward of some kind? I mean, I don't want to make the wrong move. You don't think she could have been kidnapped, do you? Shouldn't there be some kind of a ransom note if she was?"

"Hah!" said George as we drove away. "I wouldn't trust that guy as far as I could throw him."

"He doesn't seem too shook up over his wife's disappearance, does he?"

"Maybe because she's fat. I

don't go for fat females, personally. There's this gal my mother keeps trying to fix me up with, and I won't say that she's fat exactly, but she's more of an armful than I can reach around if you know what I mean."

Fondly remembering one chunky lady I'd had a lot of good times with, I only grunted in reply, and George asked, "What do you think about all that bear business? Ain't that something!"

"Some people collect all kinds of stuff. I knew a guy who collected manhole covers. Big heavy manholes they were, too. Actually, that's what did him in, he got a hernia."

"Yeah, but it's mostly women who do that kind of stuff. With my mother it's fancy pillows. But so far she's only got about a half dozen of them, you know, like the one from Niagara Falls that she says her mother picked up on her honeymoon, and one from Stone Mountain and one from . . ."

"With JoAnne Rutherford it was bears. That must be Wanda Washington's place, that little one story cement-block place painted beige-turned-tan, they must sell that color cheap by the vat . . ."

We pulled into the driveway, and right off I got the feeling somebody was watching. It was that kind of neighborhood.

Wanda Washington was on the beefy side herself, a black lady with her hair plastered down in wavy curlicues. She could have been any age between thirty and fifty. She wore a sea green pants outfit that must have cost some-



thing, and I wondered if all of Jo-Anne Rutherford's clothes made it to the Habitat thrift shop. Mrs. Washington's eyes looked twenty-twenty clever, bright enough to look a gift horse in the mouth while pulling its teeth one by one.

We identified ourselves, and she grudgingly let us in. "I don't know what the neighbors will think, but the sooner you get out of sight, the better. Now, what do you cops want from me? My old man been up to his old tricks again? I'm not bailing him out one more time, I'm telling you, I'm through with that man once and for all. If he shows his face around here again . . . ."

George informed her that Mrs. Rutherford was missing, and I noted the reaction. First, utter surprise. Real—or put on? Then, light dawning, and finally curtains closed, nobody home.

"You got some idea where she could have gone?" I kept my tone friendly. Bright Wanda Washington would turn into dim Wanda Washington if we weren't careful.

"How about her husband? He got some idea?"

"He says no. He says she went jogging yesterday morning and never came home. He says she took a credit card with her, nothing else. What do you think?"

"Well, she did go in for that jogging stuff. Hated it but did it. Said she was tired of listening to all those blonde TV gals run on at the mouth about being skinny. Said once and for all she was going to get her weight down, said

I should do it, too. I said, Miz Rutherford, all the men running after me like me just the way I am. She thought that was pretty funny, and I laughed along with her, but I meant it. Seems to me all this fussin' about fat in the diet and chlor-es-ter-all is just a lot of junk food for the brain. My theory is, like yourself the way you are and you'll be a lot better off."

"Were you at the Rutherford house yesterday?" George wanted to know.

"Sure. Cleanin'. Straightening things up. Sometimes I cook something for dinner and leave it in the fridge, but not yesterday, she didn't leave me no message to cook nothin', so I just did my regular chores and came home. I didn't see her and I didn't see him, nobody home but us chickens."

"Did Mrs. Rutherford and her husband get along?"

Wanda shrugged. "As well as most, I reckon. 'Course, he was younger than she was, and it seemed to me she could get green-eyed if he gave her cause. Seemed to me he gave her cause now and then, but he didn't stray too far, how could he? On account of the Rutherford manufacturing chain belonged to her, lock, stock, and barrel, she told me that. He was only along for the ride."

"If he couldn't stray, maybe she could?"

I saw a flicker in those bright dark eyes, and I knew the answer I got wouldn't be the whole truth and nothing but the truth. "Not so far as I know. 'Course if she did, I wouldn't blame her, he's an awful



horse's . . . well, that's only my opinion. But Miz Rutherford is one rich lady, and if she wanted to play around, I reckon she could buy a whole team of playmates anytime she felt like it."

Playmates. Odd choice of words? "What kind of playmates do you think she might buy?"

Another shrug from Wanda Washington. "Don't ask me. I can't even get a seat in the bleachers in the ballpark."

And even though we spent another half hour or so pitching questions, she never hit one over the fence but she never struck out either, and going out to the car, I thought, the woman's got me thinking in sports metaphors; now why would she bring up the subject of ballparks?

"Looks like we got an audience," commented George as we got into the cruiser.

"Yeah," I said fastening my seatbelt. "Wave to the kiddies, George. Let them see we're nothing but a pair of big teddy bears in blue suits." Teddy bears and ballparks. Miz Rutherford, won't you please come home.

We spent the rest of the morning interviewing the Rutherford neighbors. Did anybody see JoAnne Rutherford yesterday morning? Universal answer, no, not yesterday. An old fellow down the block had spotted her on occasion, he was an early riser, too, a walker, not a jogger. But yesterday he'd had company, his daughter was visiting from New England, so he didn't take his usual constitutional. So much for

lucky-breaks, but then I'd never come up with many during the course of my career so I wasn't surprised.

After lunch we drove into the city to Rutherford Enterprises headquarters. JoAnne Rutherford's private secretary was male, one Ralph Palmer, cute as a button and probably gay. But very efficient. He contacted American Express for us and found there had been no charges on her card in the past twenty-four hours. The credit card company agreed to notify headquarters immediately if any such charges should occur. I hoped that their idea of immediately and the department's idea of immediately coincided, but my experience said chances were we'd hear from them the day after we caught the perp. If there was a perp. Maybe the lady was, as Wanda had suggested, playing some game.

As for funds, Master Secretary allowed that she had all kinds of bank accounts, "all over the world actually. I'd have no way of telling whether she was utilizing one of those, I'm not privy to her personal affairs, only business matters." So much for private secretaries. It seemed with JoAnne Rutherford there was private and there was private private. How much of ourselves do we reveal? And how much of what we reveal do people make sense of?

That Wanda, the sharp one, stayed on my mind. I kept going over what she'd said and how she'd said it. Games. Ballparks. And bears. The Chicago Bears?



Anybody from the Chicago Bears spend his off time in Florida? Lots of pro-athletes made our part of Florida their at-home home, why not the Bears? Far-fetched but possible—farfetched was my middle name. There'd been times when my antenna picked up signals that nobody else zoned in on, and once in awhile those signals brought arrests and convictions. Still, this was pretty far out even for me . . . games and bears . . . bears and games . . . maybe I'd pay a visit to Slick Dick Foye, bombastic TV sports speaker, pick his athletic brains. What was left of them. Dick and I went way back to high school. He'd been just as annoying then, but we buddied around together and chances were he might do a little research for an old friend even though I was just an ordinary cop. Only trouble was, he'd want to know how come I'd been demoted from the detective division, and I wasn't keen to tell. But what the hell, being bounced for "over-zealous performance in the line of duty" could mean anything, and I didn't have to get down to the nitty-gritty if I didn't want to. So I set up a date on his online for the morrow, hooked up with George, and made tracks for the office of one Gretchen Steiger, sportswear buyer, caught her just as she was heading out the door, thus causing her noble brow to ripple in a momentary wrinkle, easy come, easy go, facelift? I use the word noble because she looked a little like a museum statue, all pale

and cold and ice-eyed. She studied our badges, offered us chairs, and asked a one word question: "Yes?"

I told her about JoAnne Rutherford. She said. "Oh. Yes. You want to know if I had dinner with her husband. The answer is yes. I was home by nine thirty. I don't know where Mr. Rutherford went after he dropped me off." And from her tone she couldn't care less.

"Did you know Mrs. Rutherford?"

"Never met her. She worked with designs, I believe. He did the front office, the selling, the public relations, and I didn't know him well either. I seldom buy from Rutherford's, they're a little too Walmarty for us if you know what I mean. Now, I really haven't anything more to tell you and I'm late for an appointment, so if that's all?"

She stood, all five feet eleven inches of her, and I was abashedly intimidated, so I let her herd us out. George, down on the street, had a pertinent comment. "Brrr. I just got a good case of frost burn."

"One thing for certain," I said, "if he was playing footsie with anybody, it sure wasn't with the ice maiden. Gretchen Steiger'd freeze a guy's best intentions off."

That night when I hit the sack I dreamed I was playing polo while riding a Clydesdale and carrying a mallet made from an icicle.

In the morning George and I were off the case. A body had been found, so homicide moved in.

“Where’d she turn up?” I asked Captain Biggers.

“She?” he said. “We haven’t come up with a she. The victim’s a he.” The body had been identified as one Joseph Ames Rutherford, Caucasian male, six feet, fair hair, eyes blue, age forty-two, found very early that morning under a bench at the Lake Monroe picnic area, cause of death, massive blows to the head with a heavy blunt instrument. Around midnight a downtown wandering night owl had spotted a man in the park fitting Rutherford’s description in animated conversation with a female who fitted JoAnne Rutherford’s description. Midnight was, coincidentally, the hour reckoned to be the approximate time of Rutherford’s demise.

“But where’s the wife?” asked George.

“Still unaccounted for, but now she’s the number one suspect and we’re looking hard. Turn in your reports to Kennedy, he’s catching the murder one . . .”

“Night owl,” I said. “By the name of Hector Chase?”

Captain Biggers gave me a look that said I was too nosy for my lowly position, said stay in your own back yard. It is my back yard, I wanted to tell him. I spent my whole life in this town, unlike some of our present force. I know this town like the back of my hand.

Aloud, the captain said, “Yeah, that’s him. Kennedy and Burns are talking to him now. Meanwhile we’re short on traffic de-

tails, Carter called in sick, and that leaves Jenkins without a partner. One of you can double with him, and the other one can go over to the middle school and give the kids a peptalk on the true blue boys in blue and how it’s a dumb, dumb idea to bring a piece into school to show off to your friends and foes.”

George was quick with the mouth. “I’ll go with Jenkins.” I wasn’t too disappointed; the school peptalk wouldn’t take long—those kids have an attention deficiency anyway—and that meant I’d be free to keep my date with Slick Dick and have time to spare. In the meantime I hadn’t had a chat with Hector Chase in several months of Sundays.

Hector Chase was a skinny black dude who lived one street back of the antique shops on First Street, the town’s main drag. Hector’s mother and grandmother had lived in the house Hector occupied, and I doubted there had been any repairs to the old homestead in the many years of the Chase family’s residency. From the outside it looked like a shack. Inside it wasn’t a candidate for a *House and Garden* photo op, but there was a big-screen TV in the living room and the place had central air conditioning slash heating. Obviously, Hector ignored aesthetics but believed in creature comforts.

Around noon I got him out of the sack. He tugged a pair of jeans over his skinny butt and stuck a Marlboro between his thin lips, all the while moaning



and groaning how a guy couldn't get his rest without the effing cops pounding on his door. "Cool it, Hector," I told him. "I've got no case with you, don't give me cause for one."

"Want some coffee, man? I got to have me some coffee. Can't face the day without my Taster's Choice. Remember that effing couple on TV, man? Think they'll ever get to the end of that story? If it was me, I'd give that husband of hers a hot cup of Taster's Choice right down the front of his pants, man. I take my coffee black, black is beautiful, man. How about you, milk and sugar? I only got canned cow, man."

"I've had mine, thanks. Seems you saw some guy in the Lake Monroe park last night. Talking to a woman. I don't like to get my news secondhand. Tell me all about it. In your own words."

"Hell, man, I was drunk. One of your boys, that Bellows that walks the night beat, he came across me making my way home and I thought he was going to take me in, but I diverted his attention—"

He squinted at me over the coffee mug. "How you like that, I diverted his attention, I been getting an education, man, by telling him about the man and the woman, how they was making noise so I figured they was having some kind of a rumble so I kept my distance and headed home, only I got kind of tired along the way so I stopped for a little snooze on the bench in front of Miss Jennie's antique store and that's where Bellows found me,

and that's all I know, I swear on my mother's grave."

"Hector," I said, "I happen to know that your mother is living out in Midway with Octavius Cronin, so don't give me that 'my mother's grave' crap. Tell me about this female. What did she look like?"

He raised his hands skyward. "Man, how could I tell? It was dark and I was loaded. She was just another white mama, I could tell that from the sound of her voice."

"What was she saying?"

He shook his head, an emphatic I don't know. "Couldn't make out words. She talked kind of lah-di-dah. Like whities that went to college." Lah-di-dah. Would a Long Island accent sound lah-di-dah to Hector?

"What was she wearing?"

He gulped the rest of his coffee. "Wearing?" He raised his eyebrows, put on a Ru Paul expression. "She was clad in a Dior gown with orange ruffles and a fur stole . . . how the hell do I know what she was wearing? When will you get it? I was drunk. It was dark. Pants. Some kind of pants she had on. That's all I can tell you."

"Tell me this, was she fat?"

"Fat? What do you mean, fat?"

"F-A-T. Stout. Plump. Corpulent. Obese. How about tubby? Was she shaped like Whitney Houston or Oprah Winfrey?"

"Oprah ain't fat no more. This one was just—regular. Like any white mama. I don't know, what you mean by fat and what I mean by fat maybe is two different



things. All I know is she was carryin' on out there with a baseball bat or somethin', wavin' it around, and the guy comes at her and grabs it out of her hands and she starts jumpin' up and down and that tells me for sure I don't want any part of night fights, especially if white folks has anything to do with it, so I take off as fast as my drunk feets can carry me—"

"Baseball bat? What would she be doing with a baseball bat?"

"I don't know, man. There's ballparks out there. For softball and Little League and stuff. Maybe she just found it and picked it up. Get off my back, man. I already told that detective dude this stuff, ain't one time enough?"

I shook my head and tried one more time for a better description. "This woman, was she built like your mother?"

He bristled. "You leave my mama out of this." I gestured sorry, and he pouted like a kid. "Kind of," allowed Hector. "You might say so. She was kinda built like my mama. Like I said. Regular."

And that left me where I'd started. Some people would call Hector's mother fat. Then others would say she was a little heavy-set. Exactly how fat had JoAnne Rutherford been?

Slick Dick had grown a beard and a mustache since the last time I saw him. I felt impelled to give him the fuzzy-face business, but up close I had to admit the fleece looked pretty good on him so I told him so.

He was clearly disappointed and I figured you couldn't please

everybody no matter how hard you tried, so I backtracked and added that a little camouflage could hide a multitude of sins. and that made him feel better because after that he could insult me back.

"So who's buying?" he said. "I know it's not you."

"But I am," I said sweetly.

"Hah! I knew it. I said to myself, old Gene wants something so he'll spring for a drink. Make mine a vodka martini and what's on your so-called mind?"

Gene. I hadn't been called that in years. Since my name is Edison, it didn't take long for my school pals to dub me Edison the Genius, which became Genius Edison and that turned into just plain Gene. As I recalled, it was even in the yearbook, Benjamin Jefferson Edison better known as Gene. And Richard Byrnes Foye became Slick Dick for various schoolboy reasons such as Richard was famous for his tall tales of feminine conquest, most of which I suspected were the opposite of true. But when you're sixteen or so, erotic schemes take up much of the young male's dream time, so Dick was our role model. He'd gone through four wives since those days. I'd had one and she'd died on me. It was hard to tell which one was the big loser in the husband game.

I ordered a beer along with Dick's martini, and while we waited, I asked the question. "Chicago Bears?"

He cocked a skeptical eyebrow. "You do know it's off season, don't



you? Even though in Florida football is close to year-round. What turns a cop's little mind to the Chicago Bears? Are you thinking of trying out for the line? I must admit you look like you've made the weight requirement; how much do you weigh now, Gene old buddy? Over two hundred, I'd wager. 'Course some of those linemen go over three hundred these days."

"What's the big deal on this weight business anyway? Everything you see and hear is low-fat, no-fat. I was always big-boned and well padded, you know that. All I wondered was, are any of the Chicago Bears making their home around here? In the off season? Past or present roster? I got a reason for asking, and I figured you'd be the one to ask."

"Ah." The drinks had arrived borne by a scramble-haired blonde. "Thanks, sugar. Next time around the tab's on me and I'm a guy that tips heavy, believe me, so you stick with me and you'll be wearing apples as big as diamonds!" And he guffawed at his joke, which obliged the waitress in the skimpy outfit to titter on cue before wriggling off to another table.

"That went right over her head," I told him.

"You know it, but when you're built like that, you're entitled to a cotton-filled brain, it's part of the package, huh? Come on, Gene, now level with me. What's the deal on the Chicago Bears?"

"It's a case I'm working, strike that, was working on. This Rutherford guy whose body was found

out by Lake Monroe, you heard about it? Well, his wife disappeared—walked out on him, that's my hunch—a couple of days before somebody hit on him. And I was wondering—I get these weird notions, remember?—if she'd been playing dollhouse with a Chicago Bears football player."

Dick used both eyebrows to express his reaction. "I swear, man, you're getting soft as a grape. What's this babe's name, anyway? I usually have some idea of the groupies in this area. Rutherford, I can't remember any camp follower named Ruther . . . wait a minute, you mean JoAnne Rutherford, the discount rag queen? Miss Five-by-Five and then some? You've got the wrong team and the wrong sport. JoAnne Rutherford has a team connection, all right, or at least she did, but not with a football team. Could be she's still got dough in the Sun Rays, the minor baseball boys. If JoAnne was, or is, playing house with anybody, it's maybe a Sun Ray."

Slowly I shook my head. "Yeah. Maybe. But something is missing—I need something tied to a bear somehow. Don't ask me why, I said it's weird."

Dick waved across the room at the waitress, made the sign of the "come again." To me he said, "I worry about you when I get a free minute, I really do. 'Course, I don't get many free minutes. Bears, huh? Well, if it's any help, the Sun Rays used to be a farm team for the Chicago Cubs, how does that suit you?"



I had a mind flash, a sudden remembered picture of one of the Rutherford bears dressed in a baseball suit, and then there was Hector's tale of the woman with the baseball bat. "Could be," I said. "Could maybe be. Thanks."

Dick got me a couple of free-fors for the Sun Rays game. I used the extra ticket as an excuse to invite Officer Gracie Nartino to an evening out, but she said she had to wash her hair so I took another officer, my partner Ron George.

"I'm not much of a baseball fan," he told me when we'd found our seats, good ones, box seats, old Dick had definitely come through. "The Magic's my team. But baseball's all right. If they've got their hitting shoes on. I hate it when some guy's throwing a no-hitter against another guy who's got the same idea. No action, no action at all."

I eyed the crowd; there wasn't a whole lot of it. I offered to buy some beers. Truth of the matter was I wanted to mingle with the crowd, to keep an eye out for fat ladies. There were those, all right, but no jogging-suited ones, and since I'd never laid eyes on the woman, I hadn't much to go on.

I had my hands full with one of those cardboard trays holding beers and a couple of hot dogs plus fries when I got back to our aisle, and naturally, that's when I laid eyes on her. A short, heavy-set woman in a dark blue pants suit, a blonde, deep in conversation with some guy at the bottom of the steps in the next aisle over.

Partway down that aisle the tray shifted, the beers spilled, and the dogs and fries went flying, fell onto the shoulders and into the lap of the couple sitting at the end of the row. The guy in the aisle seat was quick and big, and mad as hell. He grabbed, got hold of my shirt and me, aimed a fist in my direction, and by the time I'd managed to get loose, the woman in the pants suit had disappeared and I was left with a big mess of egg on my face while the couple facing me wore catsup and mustard and smelled of beer.

"Sorry," I kept saying, "sorry. I saw somebody I knew . . . sorry, I'm really sorry, I'll pay for the cleaning . . ."

Turned out the guy was the mayor's right-hand man, turned out that the lady with him wasn't the mayor's right-hand man's wife, and some sports reporter with a TV cameraman showed up and was taking pictures of what little excitement the night had to offer, and the result was that the couple and yours truly made all three TV channels and once again I was in deep doodoo with just about everybody from the mayor to Captain Biggers.

So he put me on split shift. And George with me. Eight till noon, eight till midnight. Guaranteed to mess up any time schedule.

But it still left me eight hours to get into trouble and I was an expert at that.

Today Wanda's house was a different color. It was, in fact, two different colors—pale lavender



cement blocks with royal purple trim. There was a yellow planter on the porch that held a clump of pink posies; somewhere in my life I had seen an Easter basket that looked like Wanda's house.

"Did you paint it yourself?" I asked her when she answered the door.

She narrowed her eyes. "Don't you like it?"

"I didn't say that. It's different. Unique."

That pleased her. She smiled and stepped aside so I could walk in. "What you doin' back here? Find Miz Rutherford, have you? I saw about her husband on the TV, but I ain't seen nothin' about Miz Rutherford."

I shook my head.

"I thought maybe you'd heard from her, maybe she'd got in touch. That a new TV set, Wanda? It's a real big one, Geraldo ought to show up real good on that TV."

She looked superior. "I don't watch that low-class Geraldo. The set's rented. So much a week. Want some iced tea? Do you take sugar?"

"No sugar, just plain, thanks. Rented, huh? That's not a smart way to furnish your house, they charge you an arm and a leg in interest. You could buy anything you rent for maybe half the money. I'm surprised. I figured a bright lady like you would know that. That sofa looks new, too. You find a Rent-Rooms-to-Go somewhere?"

Wanda, heading for the kitchen, shrugged.

"So maybe I'll send it back. I just wanted to look good inside

like outside. My boyfriend, he don't like tacky things."

I sat on her new sofa. I rubbed my hand over the tapestry arm covering, sipped some tea, said, "I want to talk some more about JoAnne. And her husband. Tell me about them, the things they did, the way they were with one another. Did they have a lot of fights?"

"They'd do some yellin' now and then like anybody else. Only not as much as my old man and me used to—the old boy's back in the jailhouse, you know that? I got me a lawyer, I'm filin' for divorce. Like I told the lawyer, enough is enough. But the Rutherfords, mostly they stayed away from each other. He was always claimin' he was workin', and she was always busy with her health club and her hairdresser and her dress designer. She had an idea to make clothes for fatties. She was workin' with this guy, what was his name? A woman's name, it was, but she called him *him* so he was a man. Yvonne. Something like that. French, I reckon. Miz Rutherford said big gals got as much right to fancy clothes as those skinny models. Skeletons, she called them."

"Where'd she do her designing with this Yvonne?"

"Out at the warehouse, I reckon. Her husband was over at the office—least, that's what he claimed—and she did a lot of her work at the warehouse. That's what I mean when I say they stayed away from each other. They didn't even sleep together, and that's



why I reckon he must have been doin' some tom-cattin'."

"Who do you reckon he was tom-cattin' with?"

She leaned back in her chair, clasped her hands above her head, and stretched. "I got no way of knowin', but I heard her say somethin' about his secretary one time. 'Your precious Miss Donahue,' she said. It was the way she said 'your precious Miss Donahue' that made me think she thought there was more than dictatin' going on."

"You mentioned her health club. What health club?"

"Miz Rutherford had her own personal trainer at that club that advertises all the time on the TV. Trainer name of Jackie. 'Jackie says I should walk five miles and run a mile.' Jackie says this and Jackie says that, but I never heard that Jackie said she'd lost any weight. 'Course, that subject was a no-no, she wouldn't even have a scale in her bathroom. He went out and got himself one for his bathroom, one of them scales that talk, said right out loud one hundred and fifty-six pounds, that's my weight and I tried it, so I know. She told him he bought that scale just to spite her, and I do believe she was right."

"I get the idea that you didn't like Mr. Rutherford very much."

Wanda shrugged and stood. "I thought he was playing her for a sucker but he didn't bother me none. I could take him or leave him 'cause he didn't bother me none. I don't mean to run you off, but I got a lot of things to do and that don't include sittin' around

drinkin' iced tea with you all day so if you'll excuse me . . ."

"Do you think he killed her?"

"And then somebody did him in? Serve him right, wouldn't it?"

Yvonne the designer turned out to be Ivan (pronounced *Yvonne*) like that well-known tennis player. Designer Ivan Descartes, French as they come with smoldering eyes. Maybe, I thought, he's got eye problems. And I problems as well?

*Mais non*, Ivan hadn't heard from Madame Rutherford, not a word. *Très tragique*, the death of Monsieur Rutherford, now what was he to do with all the designs he'd created for madame's *prêt-à-porter*? The chemise for the *gros femme*? La robe? The pants suit? Who was to reimburse *pauvre* Ivan for the hours he'd spent preparing the designs? *Qui vivre? Qui vivre?*

The Rutherford warehouse manager, a burly guy with a bald head that surely had been shaved clean had steered me to Ivan: "That freakin' frog! He's not hangin' around here while *I'm* in charge. Miz Rutherford might put up with him, but Miz Rutherford isn't around. Here's his address, you're welcome to it. And tell that freakin' Frenchman to stay away from here if he knows what's good for him. Tell him I said so!"

So I gave Ivan a prettied-up version of the foreman's message. He responded with a few French words needing little translation. A Gallic finger thrust ceiling-ward, he declared, "I shall sue!





*Sacre bleu*, I sue the pants from them!"

"*Vive la France*," I murmured, and left him muttering.

JoAnne had done her working out at Health Nuts, the Total Workout for the Total You. I'd expected to find Health Nuts crowded with beautiful bodies clad in sweaty leotards like the TV ads, but the place was virtually empty when I arrived just after midday. The receptionist, a young lady with a nametag reading ADRIENNE had just enough flesh on her to cover her bones and topped it off with a headful of squiggly orange locks making like hair.

I inquired for Jackie, was answered with an I-have-no-idea-what-you're-talking-about stare. "She's a personal trainer. For Mrs. Rutherford. Mrs. JoAnne Rutherford," I said.

Adrienne consulted her fingernails, each very long talon individually decorated with miniature heads depicting someone or other (could it be Elvis?), and after due digit consideration she said, "You mean Jack-leen."

"I didn't quite hear . . ."

"Jack-leen," she said again and pointed upward.

I looked upward, saw a wooden ceiling and a wrought-iron spiral staircase. "Thanks," I said and made my way up. By the time I reached the next level I was short on breath.

As I took a breathing break at the top, a cool female voice asked, "May I help you?"

I nearly said sign me up for therapy, but I answered, "I'm looking for Jackie . . . Jack-leen. I was told . . ."

"I'm Jack-leen," she said. She was wearing a black body suit that ought to be reserved for bodies like hers, there ought to be a law. Her hair was pale and pulled back in a long ponytail. Suddenly my quixotic search for JoAnne Rutherford made perfect sense.

"I'm inquiring about JoAnne Rutherford. Is there anyplace we can talk?"

"Sure. In my office, right this way. They haven't found her yet, have they? Do you think she's dead like her husband? Have a seat, would you like some coffee? Iced, maybe? That's the way I like it, black and iced at midday. It gets me out of the doldrums."

"Okay. I'll have some coffee. Black and iced." I liked my coffee hot and sweet with sugar and almost white with cream, but when in Rome . . . with Aphrodite, Venus that is . . .

Over sips of coffee I learned that JoAnne came to Health Nuts three days a week, that she stayed for three hours a visit. "That's a lot of working out, isn't it?"

"Oh, she didn't spend the whole time working out. She had a half hour on the bike and a half hour of aerobics and a half hour in what we call waterworld. The rest of the time was spent in massage and getting her act together. When she left here, she always left dressed like for a meeting."

"A business meeting? Or a date?"

Jack-leen considered the question.

"Hard to tell. I don't know what she'd wear on a date, she was designer clothes and I'm J. C. Penney, but that may have been the deal. I saw her once after she'd left here. I was on my way home when I remembered I was out of rice and rice was big on my menu that night so I stopped at a convenience store parking lot for a quick in-and-out. I parked at the side where there were trees for shade, and I noticed a car pulled way down in back with two people inside. I might not have paid any attention, but the car was kind of spectacular. It was a keeper, a 1957 Chevrolet convertible in sparkling splendor, and I'm fascinated by old cars, the collectibles, you know, so I gave it a double look. Going into the store I realized that the woman inside the car looked familiar. It was—I'm pretty sure it was JoAnne Rutherford.

"I thought I'd check it out when I left the store, but the car was gone. Anyway, if it was JoAnne, the man driving the car was not her husband—I saw his picture on the news. This guy was young, and he had a beard. I remember thinking he looked like an Arab. Sort of. Look, I'm telling you all this and I don't know if I should or not, I kind of assumed you were a cop. You look like a cop. Am I right? I thought so. Well, this was just the kind of impression you get when you get a quick glance, so don't hold me to it. I'm not sure. Not one hun-

dred percent sure, maybe not even fifty percent." She smiled, the sun came out. "Sorry."

A 1957 Chevrolet convertible. Did Jack-leen get the license number? Sorry, afraid not. "No matter," I said. "There can't be many of that model running around, and the golden oldies get special plates. You've been a big help, Miss . . . Jack-leen."

"It's Mrs. Mrs. Greer. I'm a divorced woman, Officer . . . I didn't get your name."

"Edison. Ben Edison."

"Ben. You can call me Jackie. Jack-leen is a business name."

I took a deep breath. "Now that Mrs. Rutherford isn't coming in, could I step in for some of her exercise time? Just one look at me will tell you I can really use it."

She looked me over. "It would be in the afternoons. Are you free in the afternoons? Say at three?"

"Oh yes, I'm available in the afternoons. Three will be fine. Is tomorrow okay? And the other two days, you said she came three times a week . . . whenever you can squeeze me in . . ."

I sweet-talked Madge Burns in records to run 1957 Chevrolet convertibles through her computer, but before I could hang around for a possible answer Captain Biggers came marching through and gave me a look in passing that chased me back to the squad room, where I put a call through to the Sun Rays office and got an answering machine that told me to push one if I wanted tickets, two if I was interested in rosters,



and three for schedules. I ran through the roster list, but no light dawned, nobody named Bear or Bare or Bayer or Behr, that was a nowhere idea anyway, I decided. The lady simply liked bears, and that was all there was to it.

Madge was not at her computer when I went back, but she'd left me a printout, bless her heart. It read: Registered owner, Ahmed Sadeem, 14 Quincy Court, Kissimmee. I stuffed the printout in my pocket and headed for I-4. I'd really lucked out. Only one 1957 Chevrolet convertible registered in the entire area and the name of the owner sounded like he might fit the picture. Ahmed Sadeem, he just had to have a beard!

When I rang the bell at 14 Quincy Court, the door was opened by the Sheik of Araby. Or his cousin. The man who had opened it wore an ornate gold turban festooned with strands of pearls, his feet were shod in gold shoes with turned-up toes, and his body was swathed in red and blue and gold fabric. He was a sight to behold.

"I'm on my way to work," said the sheik. "What can I do for you?"

"To work?"

"Yes, to work. At Universal. Universal Studios. What is it you want?"

I hauled out my I.D. "I'm here about JoAnne Rutherford." The sheik narrowed his big bug-brown eyes. "You are Ahmed Sa-deem?" I asked.

"That's me. Look, I really can't take time to . . . listen, if you want to talk to me about JoAnne,

how about driving me over to the studio? I can't be late, the whole cast will be waiting on me. What is it you want to know about JoAnne? If you've got questions, why don't you ask her?"

I burned.

"I would if I knew where she was."

"She's at Clown School. Over in Sarasota. The Ringling Circus offshoot, you know. That's where she is. Or at least she was three days ago when she called to tell me she got in. I've got the phone number inside if you want it, and then, man, I've really got to go. I'm the centerpiece for Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, I'm Ali Baba in the flesh!"

If I drove to Sarasota, I'd never make it back for my workout with Jack-leen. And chances were I wouldn't even make my second shift. Sarasota was on the west coast and the west coast was more than a hundred miles away, and when I got there, I'd have to find the Clown School, and then I'd have to run down JoAnne Rutherford if she was there. Clearly anybody with any sense would send word to the Sarasota authorities and let them take over, anybody with any sense at all.

I watched Ali Baba take off in his flying carpet-car and then hit the road. No time like the present, procrastination's just another word for too little, too late in my vocabulary. On the way across the peninsula I thought of all the time wasted on baseball games and chitchatting with the likes of Wanda and Hector and Gretchen

Steiger, but that was the way cop work was, a lot of running in place until a piece doesn't fit—or a piece does fit—and the puzzle is as clear as one of those paintings where the picture's been there all the time but you haven't been looking at it in the right light.

Sarasota's a nice town, kind of the-way-it-was and kind of snob-by upscale, not a bad blend. Its claim to fame was the Ringling Circus. For years it has been the circus's winter headquarters, and the circus museum along with the old Ringling mansion provides attractions for tourists. Mix the tourists with the circus people and the Floridians who put NATIVE on their front license plates, add some snowbirds with bucks, you've got Sarasota.

The Clown School was not far from the circus complex. It was housed in an ordinary looking building on an ordinary street, but once I entered the front doors I was in another world.

I told the first person I encountered that I was looking for JoAnne Rutherford, why kid around? The person I told might have been male or female, I couldn't tell. Its face was chalk white, it wore a huge red wig and a big ruffled collar, its eyes were outlined in black accented with black lighting bolts and it had a rubber-ball nose. The classic clown outfit. Over the centuries it's been known as Joey and Auguste and Pierrot and Weary Willie and Chuckles and God knows what else.

This clown with no name said, "JoAnne Rutherford? I don't think I know . . . is she a new student?"

"Yes. I think so."

"Oh. Well, in that case, follow me." And I went along, following more or less in his big-shoed footsteps. I say his, he sounded like a his. We made a couple of corridor turns, and he gestured toward a pair of double doors.

"The new Joeys are developing their schtik," he said, "in there."

"Thanks. And you are—"

"Troubles," he said, pointing to a painted teardrop beneath one eye. "As in I got plenty of."

"Thanks, Troubles," I said and went through the double doors.

There were about a dozen of them, but I spotted my target right off. The one in the bear suit. A fuzzy brown bear suit complete with head. The bear was at the far end of the room doing nothing more than being a bear as far as I could see, while all around clowns were balancing rings and balls on sticks and turning balloons into animals and, over on the other side, turning cartwheels. "Hey, watch it," said one, who was dressed in an outside baby outfit, "you almost clipped me."

"Hello, JoAnne," I said to the bear, who appeared to be staring out the window into a stand of sabal palms.

The bear turned. I could see her hazel eyes through the bear's eyeholes. They looked sad. "My name's Edison," I said. "I came to take you back."

"Why?" she asked. Her voice was sad, too.



"You look nice in your bear suit," I told her. I thought of a good word. "Cute."

She looked down. "Do I?"

"Yeah. Real cute. Want to go out for a drink somewhere? So we can talk?"

"I don't know if I'm permitted."

"You mean they won't let you out?"

"No. I don't know if they let bears in places. They don't let dogs in, you know. The nicer places don't let dogs in."

"Well, we'll find a place that's not so nice." And I put out my hand and she took it with her bear paw and we left.

The place that we found was nearby, a little bar that smelled faintly of beer. The place was all but empty and the bartender so blasé that he didn't even do a double-take when we walked in, but I figured he was used to circus people so a bear and a cop wasn't a strange sight at all.

"What'll you have?"

"Oh. I don't know . . . what do bears drink?"

"Beer, I should think. Bear beer. It goes together."

I ordered two beers, and thought her eyes looked just a little less sad. Maybe a whit more accepting. When we'd had our first sip, I came out with it.

"Why? Why did you hit him with the baseball bat?"

"He said I was fat and I would always be fat and no matter what I did, even if I had liposuction and had all my fat sliced off, I would still be fat because I was fat, fat, fat, had always been and

would always be and that was all there was to it. So I hit him with the bat because . . . I don't know, was he going to hit me with it? The bat was there, you see. Someone, some child maybe, had left it in the park, so there it was. And there he was, and he was angry, very angry, and there was the bat, and once again he'd told me I was fat." She blinked, shutting out memories?

"He said that a lot, did he?"

"Oh yes, all the time. Whenever there was no one else around."

"Instead of bashing his head in, why didn't you just leave him?"

In her eyes I read surprise. "Leave him? But he was my husband. I loved him. It's all my fault, you see. If I'd just been thin, this would never have happened."

"What did you do afterwards?"

"Well, I wandered off with the bat, and I ended up at Wanda's house. Wanda took me in, I knew she would, especially when I told her I would pay her for the favor. Wanda likes me a little, I think, but you know what I've found out? In the long run, the only thing that loves you is money. Did you know that? Money loves you. Money will do anything for you regardless."

I downed the rest of my beer. "Want another?" I asked.

"I don't think so. Beer is fattening, isn't it? I suppose we'd better get going."

I nodded. "You're right." Out at the car I opened the door for her, helped her in. "I'm a widower," I told her as we started off. "My wife Judy died a few years back,

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a heart attack. Getting past that was the toughest thing I've ever done in my life."

"I wish I felt that way. I just feel—numb." She took her bear head off. From what I could see in a quick glance, her face was exceptionally pretty.

"The doctor said the reason for the heart attack was maybe because Judy was overweight."

I could feel her looking at me. "Your wife was fat?"

"I guess you could say that. It didn't bother me much. Judy was—Judy. But I would have been real bothered if I'd known what was going to happen. I would have gone on about her weight just like your husband did, maybe. I would have nagged at her." I sneaked a quick glance. She was thinking about that.

"You're suggesting that Ames gave me a hard time about my weight because he cared about me?"

"It's possible."

She thought even longer about that. And then she said, "No. That wasn't the reason. Ames found fat disgusting. If he found even a sliver of fat on his steak, he'd send it right back to the kitchen. But he couldn't send me back, you see. I carried a lot of weight in more ways than one."

I didn't have an answer to that.

one. I didn't have another question either. I'd leave that up to Kennedy et al., who'd do the Miranda act routine, everything proper, everything cut and dried.

I checked my watch. It was after seven, and we had miles to go. I'd never make the eight o'clock shift, but what could they do? No ranking lower than split-shift traffic control unless Biggers put me on school crossing guard, and he wouldn't do that, would he? . . .

We were almost home before she spoke again. She said, "I don't suppose you'd let me out before we reach the city limits? I'd see you were suitably rewarded . . . let's see, what's the price of freedom these days? I should think it would list way up in the money market."

I took a really good look then. In the soft light of twilight her face was blurred. She reminded me of someone, someone else with rounded features and fair hair, only her eyes had been blue. . . .

Turning off the highway onto the road into town I answered the bear.

"It would cost you too much," I told her. I should have said it would cost us too much and I wasn't willing, ready, or able to pay the price.



# The Sun KILLING THE STORY

Ken Kolasinki



the night desk along with a pimply faced recent college graduate, Michael "Don't Call Me Mike" Grady, listening to the police scanner for interesting items to

**I** loved newspapers.  
I hated my job.  
I had been banished to the newspaper version of Siberia. Night after tedious night I sat at

the night desk along with a pimply faced recent college graduate, Michael "Don't Call Me Mike" Grady, listening to the police scanner for interesting items to

add to the Police Log. It was mindless work, and I hated it with a passion.

To be honest, I had only myself to blame. It had taken me all of three months to get myself unceremoniously dropkicked to the night shift of the *Sun's* editorial department. I'd slipped one too many clever headlines past night editors who lacked the sparkling sense of humor that I possessed.

The last straw—or my finest hour, depending on how you look at it—came via a headline I supplied for a story about ex-councilman Raymond Harris. Two years ago Harris had quietly stepped down from his position to avoid the ugliness of the impending disclosure of a serious drug habit. And that could have been considered one of his nicer habits.

He had spent the time since his abrupt change of career in building a hot air balloon ride company, of all things, with funds contributed by friendly constituents who “wanted to see him turn his life around.”

The feature was pure fluff. Each softball question was followed by an equally softball answer. It was everything I despised about journalism. All too precious space was being wasted. To a newspaper, space is like time in music. You have to create something memorable in those confines. It's your duty as a journalist.

Amidst the deadline mayhem and with a nod to the Beatles, I added the headline GETTING HIGH WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM HIS FRIENDS. After it had been

brought to his attention, it actually took our managing editor a few readings before he got it.

My demotion was a half step less than outright dismissal. I thought I was gone for good after a meeting between three levels of editors and myself that rivaled the Rolling Stones for sheer volume. Amazingly, I was allowed to remain. Rumor had it that the *Sun's* top reporter, Alex Whitaker, had demanded it.

The only proof I had that there was some validity to the rumor was a brief, handwritten note on my desk from Whitaker: “Clever but too far. Don't waste your talent. A.W.”

On deadline during my first week in the office he had done the rereads on my stories. Instead of blasting my mistakes or omissions, he offered advice and guidance. It was like a rookie being taken under the wing of Ted Williams. He treated my headline war against journalistic hypocrisy with some level of understanding. Occasionally I found notes tacked to the shelf over my desk with messages like “Not bad, no one noticed” or “The world has enough wiseguys.”

But now I sat at my desk, days away from my thirtieth birthday, with the sad realization that my writing career, and my life for that matter, were again going nowhere. I was once more left with that nagging feeling of being a spectator in the stands rather than a player on the field.

Most nights Michael and I sat reading over the day's editions

from cover to cover, our ears picking up relevant bits and pieces that came over the scanner. For the most part we were deathly bored.

It wasn't as if the paper was without promising stories. We had all the classic city topics: funding problems, political corruption, crime. But most important we had the Rosetta Stone of newspaper stories.

For the past eighteen months Philadelphia had had its very own serial killer. And like it or not, crime like that sells newspapers. To compound the *Sun's* good fortune, the killer—embarrassingly dubbed “The Exhibition Executioner”—had developed a relationship of sorts with Whitaker.

Alex had been attending an opening at the Museum of Art when the first body was found in the museum's gardens. There was nothing particularly brutal about the murder. It was the classic murder-mystery knife in the back. The victim was a thirty-five-year-old female who had also been at the opening.

Since then at roughly monthly intervals other bodies had been found, suffering from the same back malady, at various other art events throughout the city. Besides their fatal interest in art, there was nothing specifically similar about the eighteen victims, and both men and women had fallen prey to the killer. The police were no closer to catching the killer now than they'd been a year and a half ago.

After the third victim, a twen-

ty-five-year-old woman, the *Sun* proudly proclaimed that Philadelphia had its very own serial killer with the banner headline EXHIBITION EXECUTIONER STRIKES AGAIN! And I had been punished for bad headline writing.

That headline prompted “Double E,” as he was affectionately known among the editorial staff, to write a letter to Whitaker. The letter was simple. It stated that the headline was shameful; that the Whitaker articles were the only accurate ones in the city's two dailies and surrounding papers. And that the author of the letter was male.

He provided details known only to the police, and the circus began. The *Sun's* circulation skyrocketed. Whitaker received more letters at random intervals; they were published with the pomp and circumstance normally reserved for a correspondent filing stories from the Maginot Line in World War II.

The notoriety of the letters and his articles on the killer elevated Whitaker to movie star status in the city. He became a fixture on the local television news and even managed periodic appearances on the national news as well.

It was now July. It was hot. It was Monday, and the Phillies had lost to the Mets. And I was stuck again next to Michael “Don't Call Me Mike.” “Did you read Whitaker's latest article on Double E?” Michael asked, pushing his wire-framed glasses up on his nose for what seemed like the hundredth time tonight. “It's not bad.”

"It usually isn't. There just isn't much news to report. He's got to be digging deep for stories. Aren't we about due for another body?" I asked.

"I wish you wouldn't talk about it so casually," Michael said, flipping me today's edition. "Whitaker's on the front page."

As I had with most of what Michael had to say, I'd pretty much tuned out stories on Double E. No offense to Whitaker, but you can find only so many ways to say the police have no new leads or keep your doors and windows locked just in case.

I cruised through my nightly tasks and began working my way through the *Sun*. About three hours later I finally got around to Alex's story only to be interrupted by a police officer returning my call. I scribbled notes furiously, glancing at Whitaker's copy during the short interruptions on the other end of the line. It wasn't until I hung up that I noticed something funny.

"Mike, take a look at the beginning of Whitaker's story." I yelled across the room.

I got the usual stern look for not obeying St. Michael's request, but he did pick up the paper. He stared at it for a few minutes and then looked up. "So what? It's pretty straightforward."

"Take a look at the first four paragraphs," I said. After another prolonged silence I could see the college prodigy needed some help.

"Follow the bouncing ball," I needed. "It starts out, 'There is still a level of uncertainty . . .'

Next paragraph. 'Unless something breaks in the case soon . . . And finishes off with, 'Each call to Police Detective Stephen Breland . . . and 'Sources close to the department . . .'"

Michael stared at the page in front of him. "I still don't get it."

"Take the first letter of each paragraph. T-U-E-S. Tuesday."

"And it's Monday. He's off by a day," Michael said with annoyance. "The next three letters are D, R, and S. What's your point?"

To be honest I didn't really have one. It was just an interesting observation, a product of those mindless mental games you play on hold or stuck in traffic. I shrugged it off, and we went back to work.

Tuesday night wasn't much better. The Phillies lost again, and the temperature at eleven P.M. when I wandered into the office was still a sweltering seventy-eight degrees. Michael was already in rare form. The computers were down, and we had inherited a large portion of the day shift's workload.

It wasn't until the wee hours of Wednesday morning that we got around to our usual banter. He was still trying to turn accident reports into Pulitzers when I came across Whitaker's followup.

There it was again.

"Monday afternoon started like any other . . ."

"After repeated attempts to reach the chief . . ."

"Looking down the road," said Breland . . ."

"Even as the department scrambles for . . ."

M-A-L-E. It had to be more than coincidence.

"Hey, A. J. Liebling, take a look at Whitaker's follow." The Liebling reference went sailing over Michael's head like the Mets' three tape-measure homers served up by Phillies' pitchers earlier that night.

Michael frowned. "Not this again." Scanning the story, he tossed it on the pile of papers next to his desk. He grabbed some more police reports and bent over them. "So it spells out 'male.' I'm sure if we went through the paper we'd find tons of things like that. Just please don't do it intentionally with the Police Log. I don't want to get mixed up with things you do, like the headlines."

Now it was my turn to frown.

Then again, maybe Michael was right. Whitaker's stories for Wednesday and Thursday spelled out the gibberish P-M-A-T and H-I-N-S respectively. He was off on Friday.

In the office on Monday night Michael was attempting to gloat. The nonstop July heat and a weekend sweep by the Dodgers didn't help.

"I think there's a secret message in Amy Schaeffer's traffic story. It says 'G-O-S-L-O-W,'" he said before breaking into a laugh that was closer to a cackle.

"Gee, Mike, that's a lot funnier than my slipping D-R-I-N-K-B-U-D into the DUI report yesterday. Amy must be a true comedian," I said before heading down the hall to the composing room. Before I turned the corner I

glanced back. Michael was actually checking.

When I finally returned to my desk, Michael had regained his composure. It was an unusually busy night for thieves, thugs, and ruffians in the city, and we were chained to our keyboards until seven A.M. As we closed up shop and prepared to pass the baton to the day shift, he stopped me mid-stride. "Don't forget the detour near the art museum. Construction starts today."

I spun on my heels. "What?" I said with more force than I intended.

"The construction near the museum," he said sheepishly, slightly backing away. "It starts today. We're going to hit the morning rush hour mess."

There are moments in your life when you think you are both a genius and an idiot at the same time. This was one of those instances. I couldn't believe I hadn't picked it up.

"Where's the Sunday paper? Find the arts section," I said, looking around our desks. Michael's unease was growing, but he managed to find one first. I snatched it out of his hands, causing him to jump back slightly.

I found what I was looking for buried deep in the local events page and actually laughed out loud. "What is it?" he asked. He was still leaning backwards.

I stood there for a second, trying to process quickly what I had discovered. I made a snap decision, scooped up my things, and headed down the hallway to

wards the *Sun's* back issues library. "Don't worry about it, Mike. See you tonight," I called over my shoulder.

"Where are you going?" He hadn't noticed I'd called him Mike.

"I've got to look some things up before I leave. Go home. Don't worry." I glanced back. Michael looked worried.

As I rounded the last corner, trying to pull out my notebook and flip to a clean page, I bumped into Whitaker. He did a quick balancing act that prevented any coffee spilling from his cup, ran his free hand through his graying hair, and said in an amused voice, "Well, if it isn't my old friend from the dark side of the *Sun*. I haven't seen you in quite some time. What's got you in such a hurry this morning?"

"Nothing," I said too quickly. "I just have to check some things before I shoot out of here. You know me, I have to be back in my coffin soon or I can't stalk the night cop beat. How've you been?"

Whitaker gave me a sardonic smirk and sipped his coffee. "Same old story; bastard editors kowtowing to advertisers, dreadfully inept reporters turning in horrendous copy and headlines without a glimmer of creativity," he said with a wink. "Have you given any thought to reassuming your rebel role and taking on the opening in news? You could return to the light of day."

I hadn't known about any editorial staff opening. Then again, no editor would be hunting me down to fill a vacancy. I would

have bet Michael, woefully naive as he was, had a better chance of moving out of AAA and into the majors.

"I didn't know there was a slot open in the lineup," I said with reserve, scrolling through a nightmarish scenario and wondering how much of a blow to my ego it would be if Michael did indeed get the job.

"Think about it. You can only be stuck in Siberia for so long. Behind closed doors even your worst enemies during your little headline incident conceded that your talents would be wasted," Whitaker said in a serious tone. "I could talk to some people and promise I'll be responsible should you again stray from the path. I mean, when was the last time you wrote anything?"

He was right, and it stung. Although I was allowed to contribute stories, I hadn't written a thing since I'd been sent to Siberia. Whitaker gave my shoulder a squeeze, followed by a firm pat on the back. "I'd like you to think about it. You got into this for the right reasons. Don't let them win. You have talent."

With another all-knowing smirk he headed for the newsroom. I stood there thinking about what he'd said for a full minute. Then I burst through the library's swinging doors and got to work.

I started with Double E's first appearance and worked my way forward. It wasn't until the fourth murder—a fifty-year-old male—that things began to come together. Scanning Whitaker's sto-



ries leading up to the fateful Friday night, I found that the same pattern appeared. M-A-L-E were the first four letters of the first four paragraphs in one story. In the following edition the letters spelled out F-R-I. The only difference was that they were toward the end of both stories.

I wiped the fatigue out of my eyes and pressed on. Two hours later I had found the same pattern in all but one of the murders and noticed that the "clues" had climbed higher and higher in each story. The latest were boldly placed at the top.

My mind was reeling. I rewound the last of the microfilm spools, dropped it in the file, shut the door. There was a story here, but I wasn't sure what it meant. Whatever it was, it was going to have to wait. I was out on my feet and stumbling around like an extra in a George Romero zombie movie. I headed for my car and promptly got stuck in the traffic Michael'd warned me about.

Later that evening, after a lengthy but restless sleep, I was back in my car heading into the city. Curiosity had eaten away at me like a cancer. At a stoplight I glanced down at the small piece I had ripped out of Sunday's local events page. Tonight at six thirty was a small opening at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. P-M-A.

By seven fifteen I was slowly wending my way through the museum. I had worn my best jeans and a black jacket, but I was still woefully out of my league. After about an hour things were

winding down. I had actually enjoyed the new exhibit and scooted through it one last time on my way out. The string quartet that had drowned out much of the pompous conversation were placing their instruments in their cases as gracefully as they had played. It was then that I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Does our lovable vampire not only write well but enjoy art, too?"

It was Whitaker looking as elegant as ever in a traditional tux. He had a glass of wine in his hand and the mandatory smirk on his face. This time it was a look of amusement.

"Hello, Alex," I said, shaking his hand. "I was just on my way back to Siberia and figured I'd swing by to see the latest additions here."

Ouch! It was lame, but it was the best I could do on short notice. I wasn't exactly sure what I was looking for and whom I hoped I wouldn't find. Whitaker just nodded as he sipped the last of the wine in his glass.

"Have you given any thought to our conversation this morning? I truly meant what I said. The *Sun* is in desperate need of writers. We have plenty of reporters and tragically few writers."

I didn't hesitate. "Yes, I have thought about it. I'm interested. If you can lend a hand, I'd be grateful. I'd like the chance to get to a Phillies game again and not be waking up for work in the bottom of the third."

"You and that dreadful baseball team," Whitaker laughed. "Even if your reasoning is mis-

placed, I'm pleased to hear you're interested. I'll get on it immediately."

A small group extracted itself from a larger gathering and made its way towards us. Before we could say anything more, Alex was tangled in a mix of handshakes, hugs, and exchanges of business cards. I headed for the exit. Our eyes locked just before I left the room. Whitaker smiled slightly and nodded. I just waved.

I stopped for a brief dinner and caught the bitter end of another Phillies' "snatching defeat from the jaws of victory" loss. I even beat Michael to the office. He did a doubletake when he strolled in to find me already at work.

"Something must have happened to the earth's rotation!" he said. Michael's feeble attempts at humor would not be missed.

"Yes, funny man. And I've already had my two drink minimum, so the comedy cabaret can close for the evening." I crumpled a sheet of paper into a ball and tossed it at him.

We had worked in silence for about an hour when the call came in. As always, Michael picked it up on the first ring. After his formal greeting he became a series of "uh-huhs" before turning to me and saying, "It's for you." His face showed shock and panic.

I picked up my phone. It was our editor-in-chief, Daniel McFadden.

"Against some editors' wishes and my better judgment, you've got yourself a story. You're to drop what you're doing and get

over to the Museum of Art. Double E struck again but didn't quite finish the job. The victim is still alive and is at County General. We need eighteen inches as fast as you can get it," McFadden rattled off in a staccato burst.

All I managed was a shaky okay. "One last thing," McFadden said, his voice growing in volume. "The only reason you got the call is that Whitaker's stranded. He insisted we use you. Don't dare screw this up." With that he slammed the phone down.

Michael was staring at me. "Iron Mike, you'll be all right." I said, scooping up my recorder. "There isn't that much to do. I've done a good bit of it for tomorrow's edition as it is. Keep it simple and you'll be fine."

Just before I turned the corner he called out, "Good luck."

I peered back at him. "Thank you, Michael."

The art museum was a flurry of flashing lights, television cameras, sirens, and police tape. In less than thirty minutes I had gotten the basic facts, talked to the police chief, a detective, and a witness. I'd even managed to tick off a local TV reporter by inadvertently walking into his shot. It was turning into a good night.

It was on the way back to the office as I raced down alleys and around corners with my deadline rapidly approaching that I got an idea. I stormed into the newsroom immune to a few envious stares full of distaste. In another thirty minutes my story was done and sent for its first read-

ing. McFadden came out of his office and read it over another editor's shoulder. He muttered something to the editor when he was done, then motioned for me to come into his office.

"I want to keep this simple and quick," he said, leaning back in an old and battered swivel chair that I think every editor is required to have. "Nice job on the Double E story. That was good work on deadline. Whitaker mentioned something to me about you and a staff job. Consider it done. Head home now. You've done enough for one night."

I couldn't bring myself to throw Michael completely to the wolves, not to mention that I wanted to see the first edition. I headed back to Siberia, for (I hoped) one of the last times, and helped him wrap things up. He was curious but kept his questions to a minimum and didn't protest when I left early. I went down to the press room, pulled a morning edition out of a bundle, and sat down on a giant spool of paper.

There it was on the front page with a dreadfully unoriginal DOUBLE E STRIKES AGAIN banner. I briefly scanned my story. It had all made it in. I folded the paper and let out a laugh. Starting at the top, the first letter of each paragraph spelled out a modest I-K-N-O-W.

The next day held another unexpected turn of events for the *Sun*. Whitaker didn't show up for work. After considerable debate McFadden, with his second in

command in tow and a few representatives of the Philadelphia police, broke down the door of his apartment. They found absolutely nothing. His bed was crisply made. His sparse yet tasteful home was immaculately clean. His desk at the *Sun* yielded few other clues.

I debated whether I had enough to go to McFadden and company, let alone the police, regarding Double E and Whitaker. For whatever reason I decided against it. In about a month's time the roaring fire of speculation regarding the deadly duo had cooled almost completely. I was enjoying my new position, and other reporters, not writers, were even warming to me a bit. Even the Phillies managed to win a few. I tossed a few small stories Michael's way and gently offered some suggestions. To be honest, he didn't do badly.

In early September a weathered envelope arrived on my desk, my name on it in capital letters, no return address. The canceled stamp was from an island in the Caribbean.

*Well done, my careful reader! I always had faith in your abilities. It appears I chose my successor well. As I mentioned previously, you have talent. Please don't let it go to waste.*

*Yours truly,  
Alex*

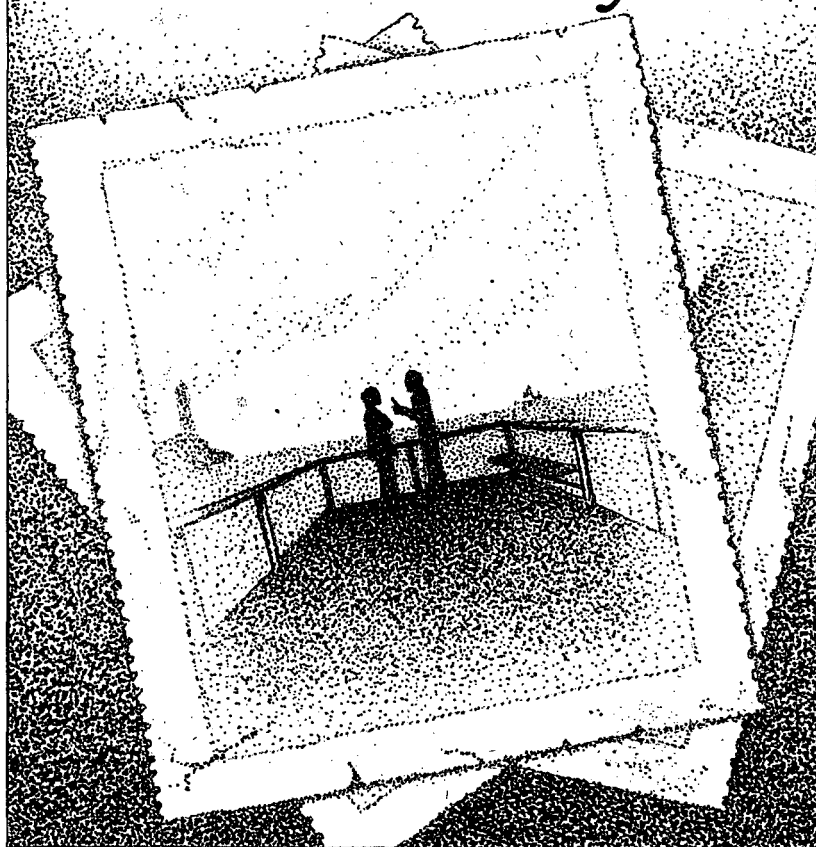
*P.S. Watch your back!*

That letter from Double E to the *Sun* was never published.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# THE FACE IN THE PHOTO

Jack Finney



*Illustration by David Monette*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 2/99*

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**O**n one of the upper floors of the new Hall of Justice I found the room number I was looking for, and opened the door. A nice-looking girl inside glanced up from her typewriter, switched on a smile, and said, "Professor Weygand?" It was a question in form only—one glance at me and she knew—and I smiled and nodded, wishing I'd worn my have-fun-in-San-Francisco clothes instead of my professor's outfit. She said, "Inspector Ihren's on the phone; would you wait, please?" and I nodded and sat down, smiling benignly the way a professor should.

My trouble is that, although I have the thin, intent, professorial face, I'm a little young for my job, which is assistant professor of physics at a large university. Fortunately I've had some premature gray in my hair ever since I was nineteen, and on campus I generally wear those miserable, permanently baggy tweeds that professors are supposed to wear, though a lot of them cheat and don't. These suits, together with round, metal-rimmed, professor-style glasses which I don't really need and a careful selection of burlap neckties in diseased plaids of bright orange, baboon blue, and gang green (*de rigueur* for gap-pocketed professor suits) complete the image. That's a highly popular word meaning that if you ever want to become a full professor you've got to quit looking like an undergraduate.

I glanced around the little anteroom: yellow plaster walls; a big calendar; filing cabinets; a desk, typewriter, and girl. I watched her the way I inspect some of my more advanced girl students—from under the brows and with a fatherly smile in case she looked up and caught me. What I really wanted to do, though, was pull out Inspector Ihren's letter and read it again for any clue I might have missed about why he wanted to see me. But I'm a little afraid of the police—I get a feeling of guilt just asking a cop a street direction—and I thought re-reading the letter just now would betray my nervousness to Miss Candyhips here, who would somehow secretly signal the inspector. I knew exactly what it said, anyway. It was a formally polite three-line request, addressed to my office on the campus, to come here and see Inspector Martin O. Ihren, if I would, at my convenience, if I didn't mind, please, sir. I sat wondering what he'd have done if, equally politely, I'd refused, when a buzzer buzzed, the smile turned on again, and the girl said, "Go right in, professor." I got up, swallowing nervously, opened the door beside me, and walked into the inspector's office.

Behind his desk he stood up slowly and reluctantly as though he weren't at all sure but what he'd be throwing me into a cell soon. He put out a hand suspiciously and without a smile saying, "Nice of you to come." I answered, sat down before his desk, and I thought I knew what would have happened if I'd refused this man's invitation. He'd

simply have arrived in my classroom, clapped on the handcuffs, and dragged me here. I don't mean that his face was forbidding or in any way remarkable; it looked ordinary enough. So did his brown hair and so did his plain gray suit. He was a young-middle-aged man somewhat taller and heavier than I was, and his eyes looked absolutely uninterested in anything in the universe but his work. I had the certain conviction that, except for crime news, he read nothing, not even newspaper headlines; that he was intelligent, shrewd, perceptive, and humorless; and that he probably knew no one but other policemen and didn't think much of most of them. He was an undistinguished, formidable man, and I knew my smile looked nervous.

He got right to the point; he was more used to arresting people than dealing with them socially. He said, "There's some people we can't find, and I thought maybe you could help us." I looked politely puzzled, but he ignored it. "One of them worked in Haring's Restaurant; you know the place; been there for years. He was a waiter and he disappeared at the end of a three-day weekend with their entire receipts—nearly five thousand bucks. Left a note saying he liked Haring's and enjoyed working there but they'd been underpaying him for ten years and now he figured they were even. Guy with an oddball sense of humor, they tell me." Ihren leaned back in his swivel chair, and frowned at me. "We can't find that man. He's been gone over a year now, and not a trace of him."

I thought he expected me to say something, and did my best. "Maybe he moved to some other city, and changed his name."

Ihren looked startled, as though I'd said something even more stupid than he expected. "That wouldn't help!" he said irritably.

I was tired of feeling intimidated. Bravely I said, "Why not?"

"People don't steal in order to hole up forever; they steal money to spend it. His money's gone now, he feels forgotten, and he's got a job again somewhere—as a waiter." I looked skeptical, I suppose, because Ihren said, "Certainly as a waiter; he won't change jobs. That's all he knows, all he can do. Remember John Carradine, the movie actor? Used to see him a lot. Had a face a foot long, all chin and long jaw; very distinctive." I nodded, and Ihren turned in his swivel chair to a filing cabinet. He opened a folder, brought out a glossy sheet of paper, and handed it to me. It was a police WANTED poster, and while the photograph on it did not really resemble the movie actor it had the same remarkable long-jawed memorability. Ihren said, "He could move and he could change his name, but he could never change that face. Wherever he is he should have been found months ago; that poster went everywhere."

I shrugged, and Ihren swung to the file again. He brought out, and handed me, a large, old fashioned, sepia photograph mounted on



heavy gray cardboard. It was a group photo of a kind you seldom see any more—all the employees of a small business lined up on the sidewalk before it. There were a dozen mustached men in this and a woman in a long dress smiling and squinting in the sun as they stood before a small building which I recognized. It was Haring's Restaurant looking not too different than it does now. Ihren said, "I spotted this on the wall of the restaurant office; I don't suppose anyone has really looked at it in years. The big guy in the middle is the original owner who started the restaurant in 1885 when this was taken; no one knows who anyone else in the picture was, but take a good look at the other faces."

I did, and saw what he meant: a face in the old picture almost identical with the one in the WANTED poster. It had the same astonishing length, the broad chin seeming nearly as wide as the cheekbones, and I looked up at Ihren. "Who is it? His father? His grandfather?"

Almost reluctantly he said, "Maybe. It could be, of course. But he sure looks like the guy we're hunting for, doesn't he? And look how he's grinning! Almost as though he'd deliberately gotten a job in Haring's Restaurant again, and were back in 1885 laughing at me!"

I said, "Inspector, you're being extremely interesting, not to say downright entertaining. You've got my full attention, believe me, and I am in no hurry to go anywhere else. But I don't quite see . . ."

"Well, you're a professor, aren't you? And professors are smart, aren't they? I'm looking for help anywhere I can get it. We've got half a dozen unsolved cases like that—people that absolutely should have been found, and found easy! William Spangler Greeson is another one; you ever heard of him?"

"Sure. Who hasn't in San Francisco?"

"That's right, big society name. But did you know he didn't have a dime of his own?"

I shrugged. "How should I know? I'd have assumed he was rich."

"His wife is; I suppose that's why he married her, though they tell me she chased him. She's older than he is, quite a lot. Disagreeable woman; I've talked to her. He's a young, handsome, likeable guy, they say, but lazy; so he married her."

"I've seen him mentioned in Herb Caen's column. Had something to do with the theater, didn't he?"

"Stage-struck all his life; tried to be an actor and couldn't make it. When they got married, she gave him the money to back a play in New York, which kept him happy for a while; used to fly east a lot for rehearsals and out-of-town tryouts. Then he started getting friendly with some of the younger stage people, the goodlooking female ones. His wife punished him like a kid. Hustled him back here, and not a dime for the theater from then on. Money for anything else but he

couldn't even buy a ticket to a play any more; he'd been a bad boy. So he disappeared with a hundred and seventy thousand bucks of hers, and not a sign of him since, which just isn't natural. Because he can't—you understand, he *can't*—keep away from the theater. He should have shown up in New York long since—with a fake name, dyed hair, a mustache, some such nonsense. We should have had him months ago, but we haven't; he's gone, too." Ihren stood up. "I hope you meant it when you said you weren't in a hurry, because . . ."

"Well, as a matter of fact . . ."

" . . . because I made an appointment for both of us. On Powell Street near the Embarcadero. Come on." He walked out from behind his desk, picking up a large manila envelope lying on one corner of it. There was a New York Police Department return address on the envelope, I saw, and it was addressed to him. He walked to the door without looking back as though he knew I'd follow. Down in front of the building he said, "We can take a cab; with you along I can turn in a chit for it. When I went by myself I rode the cable car."

"On a day like this anyone who takes a cab when he can ride the cable car is crazy enough to join the police force."

Ihren said, "Okay, tourist," and we walked all the way up to Market and Powell in silence. A cable car had just been swung around on its turntable, and we got an outside seat, no one near us; presently the car began crawling and clanging leisurely up Powell. You can sit outdoors on the cable cars, you know, and it was nice out, plenty of sun and blue sky, a typical late summer San Francisco day. But Ihren might as well have been on the New York subway. "So where is William Spangler Greeson?" he said as soon as he'd paid our fares. "Well, on a hunch I wrote the New York police, and they had a man put in a few hours for me at the city historical museum." Ihren opened his manila envelope, pulled out several folded sheets of grayish paper, and handed the top one to me. I opened it; it was a photostatic copy of an oldstyle playbill, narrow and long. "Ever hear of that play?" Ihren said, reading over my shoulder. The sheet was headed: TONIGHT & ALL WEEK! SEVEN GALA NIGHTS! Below that, in big type: MABEL'S GREENHORN UNCLE!

"Sure, who hasn't?" I said. "Shakespeare, isn't it?" We were passing Union Square and the St. Francis Hotel.

"Save the jokes for your students, and read the cast of characters."

I read it, a long list of names; there were nearly as many people in oldtime plays as in the audiences. At the bottom of the list it said *Members of the Street Crowd*, followed by a dozen or more names in the middle of which appeared William Spangler Greeson.

Ihren said, "That play was given in 1906. Here's another from the winter of 1901." He handed me a second photostat, pointing to an-

other listing at the bottom of the cast. *Onlookers at the Big Race*, this one said, and it was followed by a half-inch of names in small type, the third of which was William Spangler Greeson. "I've got copies of two more playbills," Ihren said, "one from 1902, the other from 1904, each with his name in the cast."

The car swung off Powell, and we hopped off and continued walking north on Powell. Handing back the photostat, I said, "It's his grandfather. Probably Greeson inherited his interest in the stage from him."

"You're finding a lot of grandfathers today, aren't you, professor?" Ihren was replacing the stats in their envelopes.

"And what are you finding, inspector?"

"I'll show you in a minute," he said, and we walked on in silence. We could see the bay up ahead now, beyond the end of Powell Street, and it looked beautiful in the sun, but Inspector Ihren didn't look at it. We were beside a low concrete building, and he gestured at it with his chin; a sign beside the door read STUDIO SIXTEEN: COMMERCIAL TV. We walked in, passed through a small office in which no one was present and into an enormous concrete-floored room in which a carpenter was building a set—the front wall of a little cottage. On through that room—the inspector had obviously been here before—then he pulled open a pair of double doors, and we walked into a tiny movie theater. There was a blank screen up front, a dozen seats, and a projection booth. From the booth a man's voice called, "Inspector?"

"Yeah. You ready?"

"Soon as I thread up."

"Okay." Ihren motioned me to a seat and sat down beside me. Conversationally he said, "There used to be a minor character around town name of Tom Veeley, a sports fan, a nut. Went to every fight, every Giants and Forty-Niners game, every auto race, roller derby, and jai-alai exhibition that came to town—and complained about them all. We knew him because every once in a while he'd leave his wife. She hated sports, she'd nag him, he'd leave, and we'd have to pick him up on her complaint for desertion and nonsupport; he never got far away. Even when we'd nab him, all he'd talk about was how sports were dead, the public didn't care any more and neither did the players, and he wished he'd been around in the really great days of sports. Know what I mean?"

I nodded, the tiny theater went dark, and a beam of sharp white light flashed out over our heads. Then a movie appeared on the screen before us. It was black and white, square in shape, the motion somewhat more rapid and jerky than we're used to, and it was silent. There wasn't even any music, and it was eerie to watch the movement hearing no sound but the whirl of the projector. The picture was

a view of Yankee Stadium taken from far back of third base showing the stands, a man at bat, the pitcher winding up. Then it switched to a closeup—Babe Ruth at the plate, bat on shoulder, wire backstop in the background, fans behind it. He swung hard, hit the ball, and—chin rising as he followed its flight—he trotted forward. Grinning, his fists pumping rhythmically, he jogged around the bases. Type matter flashed onto the screen: *The Babe does it again!* it began, and went on to say that this was his fifty-first home run of the 1927 season and that it looked as though Ruth would set a new record.

The screen went blank except for some meaningless scribbled numbers and perforations flying past, and Ihren said, "A Hollywood picture studio arranged this for me, no charge. Sometimes they film cops-and-crooks television up here, so they like to cooperate with us."

Jack Dempsey suddenly appeared on the screen, sitting on a stool in a ring corner, men working over him. It was a poor picture; the ring was outdoors, and there was too much sun. But it was Dempsey all right, maybe twenty-four years old, unshaven and scowling. Around the edge of the ring, the camera panning over them now between rounds, sat men in flat-topped straw hats and stiff collars; some had handkerchiefs tucked into their collars, and others were mopping their faces. Then, in the strange silence, Dempsey sprang up and moved out into the ring, crouching very low, and began sparring with an enormous slow-moving opponent; Jess Willard, I imagined. Abruptly the picture ended, the screen illuminated with only a flickering white light. Ihren said, "I looked through nearly six hours of stuff like this; everything from Red Grange to Gertrude Ederle. I pulled out three shots; here's the last one."

On the screen the scratched, flickering film showed a golfer sighting for a putt; spectators stood three and four deep around the edge of the green. The golfer smiled engagingly and began wagging his putter; he wore knickers well down below his knees, and his hair was parted in the middle and combed straight back. It was Bobby Jones, one of the world's great golfers, at the height of his career back in the 1920's. He tapped the ball, it rolled, dropped into the cup, and Jones hurried after it as the crowd broke onto the green to follow him—all except one man. Grinning, one man walked straight toward the camera, then stopped, doffed his cloth cap in a kind of salute, and bowed from the waist. The camera swung past him to follow Jones, who was stooping to retrieve his ball. Then Jones moved on, the man who had bowed to us hurrying after him with the crowd, across the screen and out of sight forever. Abruptly the picture ended, and the ceiling lights came on.

Ihren turned to face me. "That was Veeley," he said, "and it's no use trying to convince me it was his grandfather, so don't try. He wasn't

even born when Bobby Jones was winning golf championships, but just the same that was absolutely and indisputably Tom Veeley, the sports fan who's been missing from San Francisco for six months now." He sat waiting, but I didn't reply; what could I say to that? Ihren went on, "He's also sitting just back of home plate behind the screen when Ruth hit the home run, though his face is in shadow. And I think he's one of the men mopping his face at ringside during the Dempsey fight, though I'm not absolutely certain."

The projection-booth door opened, the projectionist came out, saying, "That all today, inspector?" and Ihren said yeah. The projectionist glanced at me, said, "Hi, professor," and left.

Ihren nodded. "Yeah, he knows you, professor. He remembers you. Last week when he ran off this stuff for me, we came to the Bobby Jones film. He remarked that he'd run that one off for someone else only a few days before. I asked who it was, and he said a professor from the university named Weygand. Professor, we must be the only two people in the world interested in that one little strip of film. So I checked on you; you were an assistant professor of physics, brilliant and with a fine reputation, but that didn't help me. You had no criminal record, not with us, anyway, but that didn't tell me anything either; most people have no criminal record, and at least half of them ought to. Then I checked with the newspapers, and the *Chronicle* had a clipping about you filed in their morgue. Come on—" Ihren stood up—"let's get out of here."

Outside, he turned toward the bay, and we walked to the end of the street, then out onto a wooden pier. A big tanker, her red-painted bottom high out of the water, was sailing past, but Ihren didn't glance at her. He sat down on a piling, motioning me to another beside him, and pulled a newspaper clipping from his breast pocket. "According to this, you gave a talk before the American-Canadian Society of Physicists in June, 1961, at the Fairmont Hotel."

"Is that a crime?"

"Maybe; I didn't hear it. You spoke on 'Some Physical Aspects of Time,' the clipping says. But I don't claim I understood the rest."

"It was a pretty technical talk."

"I got the idea, though, that you thought it might actually be possible to send a man back to an earlier time."

I smiled. "Lots of people have thought so, including Einstein. It's a widely held theory. But that's all, inspector; just a theory."

"Then let's talk about something that's more than a theory. For over a year San Francisco has been a very good market for old-style currency; I just found that out. Every coin and stamp dealer in town has had new customers, odd ones who didn't give their names and who didn't care what condition the old money was in. The more worn, dirty,

and creased—and therefore cheaper—the better they liked it, in fact. One of these customers, about a year ago, was a man with a remarkably long, thin face. He bought bills and a few coins; any kind at all suited him just as long as they were no later than 1885. Another customer was a young, goodlooking, agreeable guy who wanted bills no later than the early 1900's. And so on. Do you know why I brought you out on this dock?"

"No."

He gestured at the long stretch of empty pier behind us: "Because there's no one within a block of us; no witnesses. So tell me, professor—I can't use what you say, uncorroborated, as evidence—how the hell did you do it? I think you'd like to tell someone; it might as well be me."

Astonishingly, he was right; I *did* want to tell someone, very much. Quickly, before I could change my mind, I said, "I use a little black box with knobs on it, brass knobs." I stopped, stared for a few seconds at a white Coast Guard cutter sliding into view from behind Angel Island, then shrugged and turned back to Ihren. "But you aren't a physicist; how can I explain? All I can tell you is that it really *is* possible to send a man into an earlier time. Far easier, in fact, than any of the theorists had supposed. I adjust the knobs, the dials, focusing the black box on the subject like a camera, as it were. Then—" I shrugged again "—well, I switch on a very faint specialized kind of precisely directed electric current or beam. And while my current is on—how shall I put it? He is afloat, in a manner of speaking; he is actually free of time, which moves on ahead without him. I've calculated that he is adrift, the past catching up with him at a rate of twenty-three years and eleven weeks for each second my current is on. Using a stopwatch, I can send a man back to whatever time he wishes with a plus or minus accuracy of three weeks. I know it works because—well, Tom Veeley is only one example. They all try to do something to show me they arrived safely, and Veeley said he'd do his best to get into the newsreel shot when Jones won the Open Golf Championship. I checked the newsreel last week to make sure he had."

The inspector nodded. "All right; now, *why* did you do it? They're criminals, you know; and you helped them escape."

I said, "No, I didn't know they were criminals, inspector. And they didn't tell me. They just seemed like nice people with more troubles than they could handle. And I did it because I needed what a doctor needs when he discovers a new serum—volunteers to try it! And I got them; you're not the only one who ever read that news report."

"Where'd you do it?"

"Out on the beach not far from the Cliff House. Late at night when no one was around."

"Why out there?"



"There's some danger a man might appear in a time and place already occupied by something else, a stone wall or building, his molecules occupying the same space. He'd be all mixed in with the other molecules, which would be unpleasant and confining. But there've never been any buildings on the beach. Of course, the beach might have been a little higher at one time than another, so I took no chances. I had each of them stand on the lifeguard tower, appropriately dressed for whatever time he planned to enter, and with the right kind of money for the period in his pocket. I'd focus carefully around him so as to exclude the tower, turn on the current for the proper time, and he'd drop onto the beach of fifty, sixty, seventy, or eighty years ago."

For a while the inspector sat nodding, staring absently at the rough planks of the pier. Then he looked up at me again, vigorously rubbing his palms together: "All right, professor, and now you're going to bring them all back!" I began shaking my head, and he smiled grimly and said, "Oh yes you are, or I'll wreck your career! I can do it, you know. I'll bring out everything I've told you, and I'll show the connections. Each of the missing people visited you more than once. Undoubtedly some of them were seen. You may even have been seen on the beach. Time I'm through, you'll never teach again." I was still shaking my head, and he said dangerously, "You mean you won't?"

"I mean I can't, you idiot! How the hell can I reach them? They're back in 1885, 1906, 1927, or whatever; it's absolutely impossible to bring them back. They've escaped you, inspector—forever."

He actually turned white. "No!" he cried. "No; they're criminals and they've got to be punished, *got to be!*"

I was astounded. "Why? None of them's done any great harm. And as far as we're concerned, they don't exist. Forget them."

He actually bared his teeth. "Never," he whispered, then he roared, "I *never* forget a wanted man!"

"Okay, Javert."

"Who?"

"A fictional policeman in a book called *Les Misérables*. He spent half his life hunting down a man no one else wanted any more."

"Good man; like to have him in the department."

"He's not generally regarded too highly."

"He is by me!" Inspector Ihren began slowly pounding his fist into his palm, muttering, "They've got to be punished, they've got to be punished," then he looked up at me. "Get out of here," he yelled, "*fast!*" and I was glad to, and did. A block away I looked back, and he was still sitting there on the dock slowly pounding his fist in his palm.

I thought I'd seen the last of him then but I hadn't; I saw Inspector Ihren one more time. Late one evening about ten days later he phoned my apartment and asked me—ordered me—to come right over with

my little black box, and I did even though I'd been getting ready for bed; he simply wasn't a man you disobeyed lightly. When I walked up to the big dark Hall of Justice, he was standing in the doorway, and without a word he nodded at a car at the curb. We got in and drove in silence out to a quiet little residential district.

The streets were empty, the houses dark; it was close to midnight. We parked just within range of a corner streetlight, and Ihren said, "I've been doing some thinking since I saw you last, and some research." He pointed to a mailbox beside the streetlamp on the corner a dozen feet ahead. "That's one of the three mailboxes in the city of San Francisco that has been in the same location for almost ninety years. Not that identical box, of course, but always that location. And now we're going to mail some letters." From his coat pocket, Inspector Ihren brought out a little sheaf of envelopes addressed in pen and ink and stamped for mailing. He showed me the top one, shoving the others into his pocket. "You see who this is for?"

"The chief of police."

"That's right; the San Francisco chief of police—in 1885! That's his name, address, and the kind of stamp they used then. I'm going to walk to the mailbox on the corner, and hold this in the slot. You'll focus your little black box on the envelope, turn on the current as I let it go, and it will drop into the mailbox that stood here in 1885!"

I shook my head admiringly; it was ingenious. "And what does the letter say?"

He grinned evilly. "I'll tell you what it says! Every spare moment I've had since I last saw you I've been reading old newspapers at the library. In December 1884 there was a robbery, several thousand dollars missing; there isn't a word in the paper for months afterward that it was ever solved." He held up the envelope. "Well, this letter suggests to the chief of police that they investigate a man they'll find working in Haring's Restaurant, a man with an unusually long thin face. And that if they search his room, they'll probably find several thousand dollars he can't account for. And that he will absolutely *not* have an alibi for the robbery in 1884!" The inspector smiled, if you could call it a smile. "That's all they'll need to send him to San Quentin, and mark the case closed; they didn't pamper criminals in those days!"

My jaw was hanging open. "But he isn't guilty! Not of that crime!"

"He's guilty of another just about like it! And he's got to be punished; I *will* not let him escape, not even to 1885!"

"And the other letters?"

"You can guess. There's one for each of the men you helped get away, addressed to the police of the proper time and place. And you're going to help me mail them all, one by one. If you don't, I'll ruin you,

and that's a promise, professor." He opened his door, stepped out, and walked to the corner without even glancing back.

I suppose there are those who will say I should have refused to use my little black box no matter what the consequences to me. Well, maybe I should have, but I didn't. The inspector meant what he said and I knew it, and I wasn't going to have the only career I'd ever had or wanted be ruined. I did the best I could; I begged and pleaded. I got out of the car with my box; the inspector stood waiting at the mailbox. "*Please don't make me do this,*" I said. "*Please! There's no need! You haven't told anyone else about this, have you?*"

"Of course not; I'd be laughed off the force."

"Then forget it! Why hound these poor people? They haven't done so much; they haven't really hurt anyone. Be humane! Forgiving! Your ideas are at complete odds with modern conceptions of criminal rehabilitation!"

I stopped for breath, and he said, "You through, professor? I hope so because nothing will ever change my mind. Now, go ahead and use that damn box!" Hopelessly I shrugged, and began adjusting the dials.

I am sure that the most baffling case the San Francisco Bureau of Missing Persons ever had will never be solved. Only two people—Inspector Ihren and I—know the answer, and we're not going to tell. For a short time there was a clue someone might have stumbled onto, but I found it. It was in the rare photographs section of the public library; they've got hundreds of old San Francisco pictures, and I went through them all and found this one. Then I stole it; one more crime added to the list I was guilty of hardly mattered.

Every once in a while I get it out, and look at it; it shows a row of uniformed men lined up in formation before a San Francisco police station. In a way it reminds me of an old movie comedy because each of them wears a tall helmet of felt with a broad, turn-down brim and long uniform coats to the knees. Nearly every one of them wears a drooping mustache, and each holds a long nightstick poised at the shoulder as though ready to bring it down on Chester Conklin's head. Keystone Kops they look like at first glance, but study those faces closely and you change your mind about that. Look especially close at the face of the man at the very end of the row, wearing sergeant's stripes. It looks positively and permanently ferocious, glaring out (or so it always seems) directly at me. It is the implacable face of Martin O. Ihren of the San Francisco police force, back where he really belongs, back where I sent him with my little black box, in the year 1893.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**A**ward-winning author Carolyn Hart is back with another mad-cap chase around the South Carolina coastal island of Broward's Rock where Annie Laurence runs her mystery bookshop, *Death on Demand*. In *Yankee Doodle Dead* (Avon Twilight, \$21), a thoroughly obnoxious retired military man has been volunteering—and bullying—his way into positions of power in the community. Even Annie's oldest and dearest customer, the generally unintimidated Henny, is reeling from one of the general's blows. The general's latest conquest is the library board, which also happens to be the guiding force behind the island's big Fourth of July festivities. It's inevitable that there will be more than fireworks to close the holiday picnic, but Annie and her amateur sleuth husband Max have their work cut out for them in trying to catch a killer. As always, Hart tells her tale with a feathery touch that tickles the fancy.

Kay Hooper is reviving the kind of book that readers used to call "romantic suspense." That's good news for fans of Victoria Holt and Phyllis Whitney. Although today's practitioners have updated the formula somewhat, usually making the heroine more independent and liberated, Hooper's *Haunting Rachel* (Bantam, \$22.95) offers plenty of familiar ground, too. Rachel Grant's childhood sweetheart and family friend, Thomas Sheridan, was presumed lost in an airplane accident in South America mere weeks before they were to be married. Ten years later, Rachel is back home in Richmond to settle her deceased parents' estate when she catches sight of a man who could be Sheridan's twin. Or his ghost. And then the accidents begin to happen. . . . Hooper serves up a lovely and sympathetic heroine, a mysterious stranger, a whiff of conspiracy, and the lurking presence of danger. That about covers it, right?

R. D. Zimmerman's third mystery in his series featuring TV newscaster Todd Mills is in the bookstores, and you'll have a tough task

(continued on page 142)

# THE STORY THAT WON

The September Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Nils V. Bockmann of Centerville, Massachusetts. Honorable mentions go to Virginia Thompson of Alameda, California; Rob Cain of Oak Park, Illinois; Dick Saxe of Toledo, Ohio; Robert Isenberg of Cornwall, Vermont; Al Cross of Sacra-



mento, California; J. C. Lamanna, Jr., of Syracuse, New York; Jan Streilein of Aiken, South Carolina; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Don Carlson of Cameron Park, California; Robert H. Wynn of Young's Point, Ontario, Canada; and Diane Coutré of Santa Monica, California.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

## A STREETCORNER ALTERATION by Nils V. Bockmann

Police Captain Hardbrick stood on the sidewalk staring at a row of questionable-quality armchairs. Every piece was the victim of a bullet hole that stood out against the plastic-wrapped upholstery. Behind him an enraged man wore a T-shirt that read MAJESTIC REUPHOLSTERERS. The man was handcuffed to restrain him from strangling the two uniformed patrolmen who stood next to the curb. All three policemen—Officer Bob Weaver, Officer Harry Shorts, and Captain Hardbrick—had been described as the dimmest lamps on the street at one time or another.

The captain began to inspect the emptied service revolver in his hand. Officer Weaver immediately started to sob, saying, "I was in front of Harry's house, where we begin walking our beat, when I was suddenly and unexpectedly surprised by these threatening chairs. So I pulled out my gun and IBEGANTOSHOOT AND, AND . . ."

"Why did you shoot the chairs?" asked the captain.

"They were armed," said Weaver.

Obviously irritated, Officer Harry Shorts spoke up. "Oh boy, that's the dumbest excuse ever. I yelled out, 'Don't shoot my chairs,' and Bob just ignored me."

"What's dumb?" asked the captain. "Why *shouldn't* Weaver defend himself against these armed chairs?"

"They are my chairs," explained Shorts. "I had them covered."

"Smart thinking, Shorts," said the captain. He turned to Weaver and placed a fatherly hand on his shoulder. "And as for you, Bob, exhibit a few more street smarts yourself, man. That plastic could have been explosive."

(continued from page 140)

trying to put this tale down before the ending. **Outburst** (Delacorte, \$21.95) opens with a hot phone tip: Todd can catch a blackmailer at work at a spot along the Mississippi River. Instead he witnesses the brutal murder of a police officer. While Todd's lover, homicide cop Steve Rawlins, investigates this crime, Todd, as the first reporter on the story, also pursues it vigorously—with the help of his anonymous tipster. And the net does seem to be closing in on young Christopher Kenney—Todd learns through investigative reporting that "Kris" had been accused before of killing a gay cop. Despite his history, Todd alerts his attorney friend Janice, who arranges for the kid's legal representation—assuaging an uneasy feeling Todd has about this story. Rightfully so as it turns out, in an explosive, high-tension ending with a powerful twist. Zimmerman offers flashes of Kris's point of view throughout, giving readers a sympathetic look into the life of a young man who is certain that his destiny is to be female.

Bestselling author of legal thrillers William Bernhardt has written a short novel that's long on suspense and tall on feeling titled **The Midnight Before Christmas** (Ballantine, \$14.95). Attorney Megan McGee anticipates a quiet Christmas this year, the first since her mother died. But when a terrified woman comes into the office right before closing time, pleading for legal protection from her violent ex-cop husband, it becomes Megan's case. Bernhardt's small cast is memorably drawn, especially the fiercely loyal Megan. His plot is cleverly devised, with moments of heart-stopping action and heart-warming interaction.

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### SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":

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The guilty moonlighter is Fred Smith, who works shifts as a plumber and electrician.

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|-------|----------------------|-------|---------------------|
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| 5     | Fred and Betty Smith | Vt.   | plumber/electrician |
| 4     | Adam and Ellen Quinn | Tenn. | mason               |
| 3     | Dan and Cindy Nader  | Wash. | riveter             |
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| 1     | Elmo and Flora Roget | Tex.  | carpenter           |



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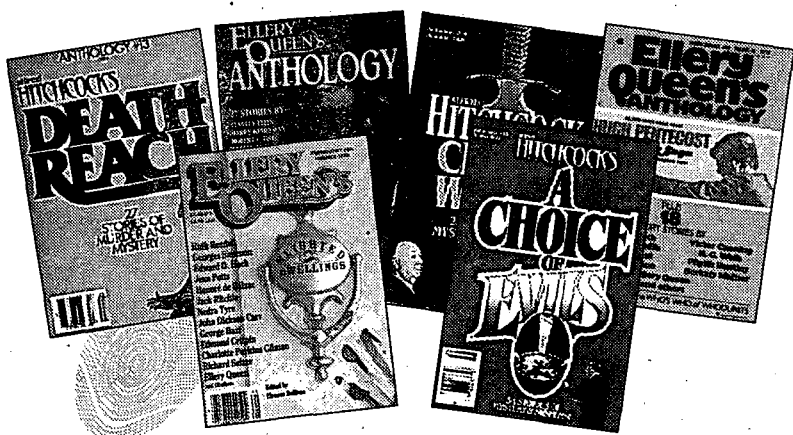
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